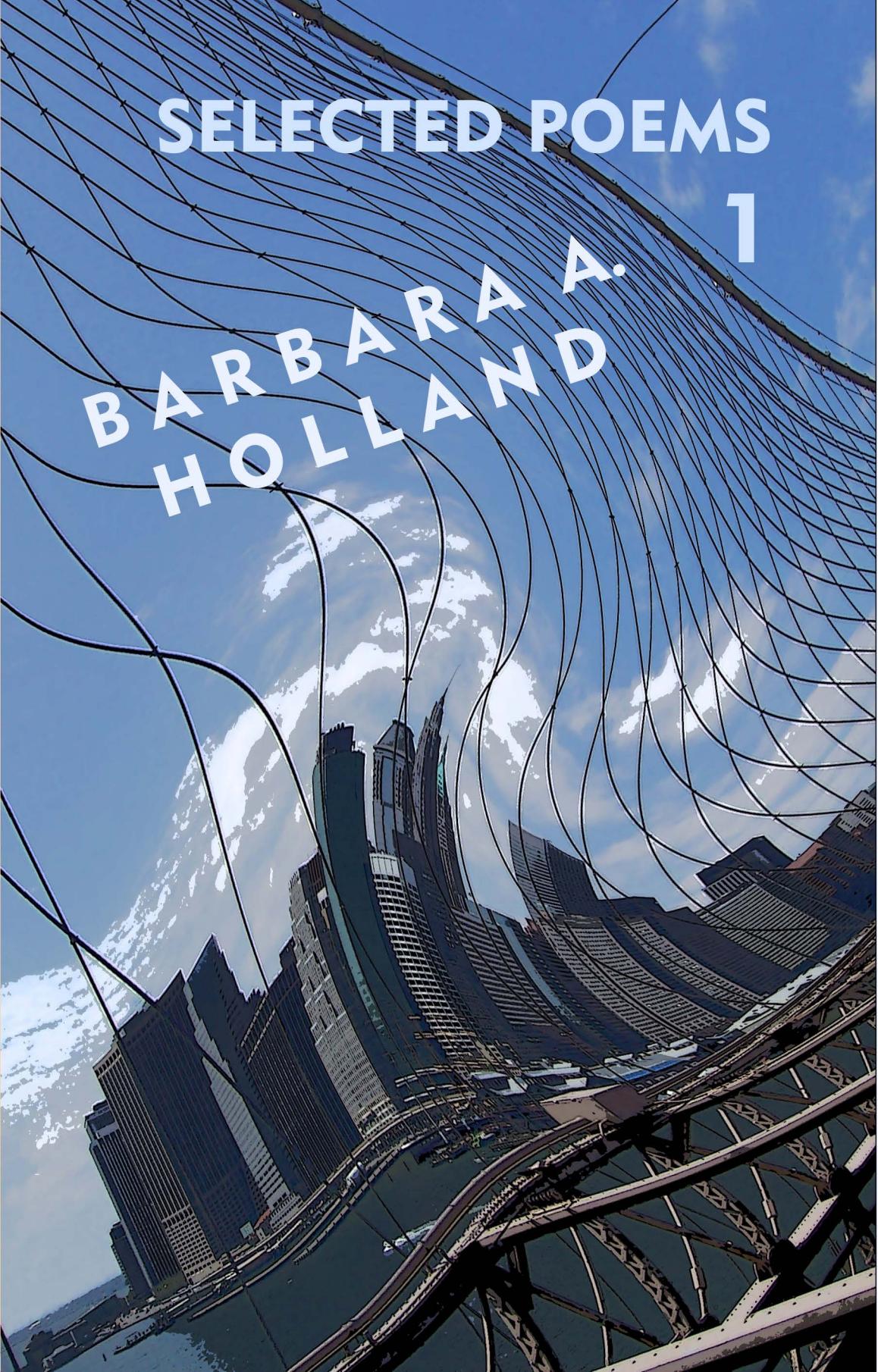


SELECTED POEMS

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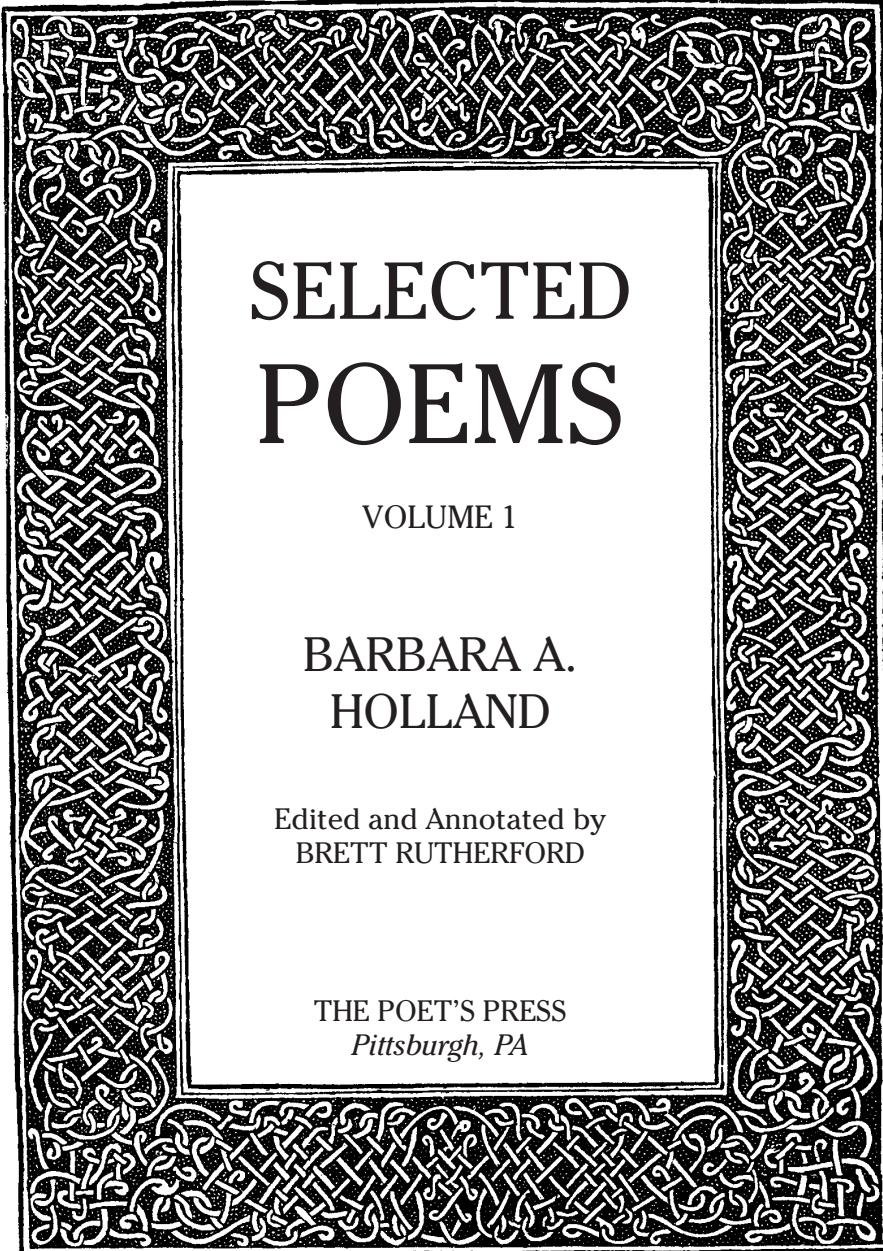
BARBARA A.
HOLLAND



Also by BARBARA A. HOLLAND

POETRY

After Hours in Bohemia (2020)
Autumn Numbers (1980)
Autumn Wizard (1973)
The Beckoning Eye (2019)
Burrs (1977, 1981)
Collected Poems Volume 1 (1980)
Crises of Rejuvenation (1973-75, 1985)
The Edwardian Poems & The Queen of Swords (1991)
Lens, Light & Sound (1968)
Medusa: The Lost First Chapbook (2019)
Melusine Discovered (1975)
On This High Hill (1974)
Penny Arcana (n.d.)
Running Backwards (1983)
Out of Avernus (2019)
The Secret Agent (2019)
The Shipping on the Styx (2019)
You Could Die Laughing (1975)



SELECTED POEMS

VOLUME 1

BARBARA A.
HOLLAND

Edited and Annotated by
BRETT RUTHERFORD

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Pittsburgh, PA

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SELECTED POEMS

VOLUME 1



FORWORD

This publication is the first of two volumes bringing together the selected works of America's great imaginative poet, Barbara A. Holland (1925-1988). It is based upon a 112-page edition published in 1980 and ambitiously titled *Collected Poems*. At that time, the second volume was intended to be Holland's cycle of poems centered around the paintings of René Magritte, titled *Crises of Rejuvenation* and originally published in two volumes in 1973 and 1974.

Only a few hundred copies of *Collected Poems* were circulated. After the poet's death in 1988, the project fell into limbo. *Crises of Rejuvenation* remained in print, but these early poems fell out of sight.

When the Poet's Press received the manuscripts and notebooks of Barbara Holland in 2019, replete with several unpublished book manuscripts, hundreds of poems that had appeared only in magazines, and hundreds more in various stages of draft in notebooks, it became clear that it was unwise ever to have called the 1980 project "collected poems." We may never see all of this poet's output, since few manuscripts survive of hundreds of poems that appeared in obscure little magazines.

The first volume, which I compiled with the poet in 1980, should instead be regarded as the commencement of her "Selected Poems," a still-living poet's choice of the works she wanted to preserve. A number of poems had previously appeared only in magazines, many of them already extinct by 1980. Additionally, we included the complete text of her earlier chapbooks: *A Game of Scraps*; *Penny Arcana*; *Melusine Discovered*; *On This High Hill*; *Lens, Light & Sound*; and *You Could Die Laughing*. The poems from an unpublished chapbook, *East from Here*, were likewise included.

In 1983, during a period when The Poet's Press was on hiatus, Holland worked with Patricia Fillingham of Warthog Press on a different "Selected Poems" edition, titled *Running Backwards*. That 260-page production included many poems that had already appeared in the 1980 volume, most of the Magritte poems from *Crises of Rejuvenation*, and a number of additional poems. The present volume leaves the Magritte poems for Volume 2 of this series, retains all of

the original 1980 *Collected Poems*, and adds all the items which were unique to *Running Backwards*.

My initial intention had been to maintain the author's original order, and to title each segment according to the chapbooks in which they originally appeared. This method had its benefits in that it revealed the development of the poet through several "periods," but offered the serious defect of leaving related poems scores of pages from one another.

I believed, however, that a long volume of poetry should have a dramatic structure of its own — a beginning, a middle and an end. Few readers will want to undertake these more than 100 poems at a single sitting, so that any attempt to structure such a vast number of poems cannot meet with success. Accepting this reality, the poet and I re-arranged the poems into shorter segments. Each segment brought together poems related either in theme or mood; each segment demonstrated the poet's talents in a given type of poetic effort; and each segment may be read as a separate "chapter" or "chapbook" in itself. What is lost in chronological interest will be gained by the general reader as a more coherent and pleasurable book.

A Game of Scraps introduces the author and her New York City surroundings, followed by *After Hours in Bohemia*, which evokes the beauty and alienation of the poet's life in Manhattan even more intensely.

In *At Breaking Point of Sky*, we turn to the natural world rather than that of human artifacts.

In Sudden Secret is devoted to self-revelation.

Later segments of this book show us the poet's imagination run riot. In *Bad Company*, we are treated to a host of monsters and fantasitics, while *Out of Avernus* plunges into the deep well of myth and lore, from Pallas Athena to the unfortunate Melusine. And quite properly, poems about other poets are included here where they belong — with the gods!

Whimsy takes the reins in *You Could Die Laughing*. Here the poet rehearses the kind of almost surreal twists that characterize *Crises of Rejuvenation*, her 90-poem cycle whose integral reprint will comprise Volume 2 of this series. In anticipation of that volume, whose guiding spirit is the imagery of René Magritte, we end this one with a segment called *Toward Magritte*.

The unique poems from *Running Backwards* have been distributed among the sections of this book, according to theme or mood.

My work on the Barbara A. Holland papers has yielded five new compilations of her poetry, adding vastly to the corpus of her poems. This project is not yet done, but should be completed in 2020.

Where does *Selected Poems* fit in this overall project? It should be regarded as the poet's personal choice, from 1980 and 1983, rescued from chapbooks and magazines, of the poems she regarded as her best, in their final form. Some annotations have been added, and some punctuation (commas and hyphens) have been added, in keeping with the overall editing of the Barbara A. Holland papers that became available in 2019. I have annotated a few poems to clarify obscure words or to provide context.

The second volume will include the Magritte-inspired poems, with notes based on interviews with Holland. Finally, *After Hours in Bohemia* will collect the remaining manuscript poems and poems recovered and reconstructed from notebooks, plus a number of critical essays about the poet and her work.

— Brett Rutherford
Pittsburgh, February 19, 2020



A GAME OF SCRAPS

SCAVENGER



AM A WANDERER with dirty feet
peering through the ventails¹
of the visored faces,
sniffing the breaths of open doors,
waiting beneath the ledges
of the careless windows
for sounds that might spill over
for my claws to catch

and crack for the extraction of a swarm of things,
large-eyed and cat-foot careful
of the nerves they walk.

I am a brokerage for shares in storms;
the mendicant, more bowl than ego, hollowed up
to lurch of moon, a dagger catcher stopping Leonids.²
I am the prowler of the noon-white streets,
the closet audience of somnambulists, the ear
that bites, the eye that masticates, the nerve that sings.
I am the wanderer with dirty feet
who wipes worlds from existence by removing dirt.

¹ *Ventail*. The movable part of the front of a medieval helmet.

² *Leonids*. An autumn meteor shower, appearing to originate in the constellation of Leo.

STRANGE ARRIVAL

Were I to lean against you
you would be soft as air to me,
would not support me.

Were I to try to touch you
you would shrink inside
as shadow into gnomon
on the boss of noon
would be intangible.

Were I to seek you out
on maps papered
to the lining of my skull,
you would feel my crayon
run your lifeline
down my palm, would scold me,
for importunate advances
should remain invisible.

Shadow Monster,
we are twinned upon
one tide that swings a year
to me again, and you
as well, against
the better judgment
of my own command
into the long pull
of your breathing,

at a snow flick
on my wrist, at breath
of shadow before it falls
upon me after long
separation ending,
limps in acquiescence
to inevitable odds.

Gratefully I weaken
to your welcoming,
inlock the lies that guard you
from your sovereign self.

SO MUCH FOR INNOCENCE

There is no getting at you,
no passing those eyelids.

The lashes laid out
on your cheek
are final.

Your face is locked,

but you are still in there.
Your shadow lives
on the window blind,

busied with your personal
rites of the moon,

and no candle
to show for it.

Your listening leans
hard against the inside
of your forehead,

recording
me.

THE COMEDY OF PAIN

If this is where I hope to seal myself
against the leaching in of influence that swells
mid-trunk to knife-edged rock that saws through fibres,
or, in their greatness, springs my frame apart,
I know I cannot trust, press hard
on costume fabric made to bear
a short-run sputtering of spotlight gold
which tears at touch. I cannot walk a floor
condemned of unsure planks. I hope,
but hope must mince across uncertain wood.

Should force be loosed through dog-howl loss,
this gesture of a moon might fray
to crumbs against the onyx stares of bolted doors
street-length inimical, where once I found
in show-brash mockery a gamin laugh that stripped
the soft rot of self-pity from my banishment, and sneered
my anger into snake-hide of a harlequin.

LOAFERS OF A SATURDAY NIGHT

Walking among my whence, I watch them, propped
against the moment, unconcerned with when or where;
some cast

from Molière into swagger clothes. Their burnished hair
helmets their structure of indifference and frames
their faces with the narrowness of scorn. My ways
through thorn-breaks of my own are knotted, slit
by the implication of slack swords which arrogance
fits into idle fists. I set my jaw against
my latest flow of words and knock them out
from sockets where their sounds have lodged. Along
this nugget-plucking way my monitors
toss loose change to the wind, and pick my locks.

THE HOUSE THAT NEVER WAS

Locked between walls and the roof the light has made
against surrounding drain of people, I forget
that Time progresses as it does outside,
but here, there is so little change.

A light or two goes out. The promenade
goes on. Heat presses evenly from herd backed up
by simple obstacles till heat and light
have domed us over in an airless room.
Emergence into darkness brings relief. I stagger out
as from confinement in a basement, reel as Time
comes head-down hunched at me, when we collide,
I with the stopped clock stuck upon an hour
that played itself so many hour-lengths over,
knocked into morning, and Time eating up
all but the staleness that the night forgot.

A GAME OF SCRAPS



OW CAN THEY crowd me out, or buffet me
to gutter-walk with groundlings?

Where these courtiers slouch
the shuffling service of their
cardboard kings,
no one shall threaten me.

No figurante³ lurks crouched
to lash at me. Fists flourish, spattering the light
to showers of counterfeit where I have crashed
a bull-charge through their midst. Now that I come,
I carry my own here through this melange
of taut immediacies, and pick them off,
as with a lath, the teeth of picket fence
in serrate slur of contact, with contempt. I touch,
yet only feel the objects of my choosing.

This is a game of scraps. I snatch the best.
The second-best are got by accident, some caught
on hooked excrescences of mind while others wrap
their lengths about my ankles. What I bring
out of this witch-crazed moment I shall turn
to uses of my own, rebuild, rewire, reactivate with sound
until I come once more this way inside myself,
the weft of this night's dances on my back.

³ *Figurante*. A stage character with a non-speaking role; a supernumerary.

TURNCOAT NIGHT

Hostility seeps out. Each door that gapes
a crack-breadth reeks of it. Scowls follow me,
measure my time of staying till impatience boils
and sends me from unfinished eating. Eye-slot stares
guard cash, answer my questions, order my exit, out
upon announcements of the absences of friends
cut off through back-slit dealing. Even the singers left
on rankness of indifference, including one returned
to penny cups when others passed me by in charity.

The proffered hand rolls tightwad into bludgeon,
curled hard over fist-core coldness
as the horns blow insolence.

THIS INCARNATION

I should be
shaking off layers
of experience

until all
the shedding ceases
at the pivotal
nothing,

and I am
the identical portrait
of everyone,

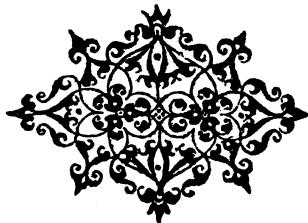
of all,

but rather,
I am being hammered
by the beat
of my heart

into the vortex
of an absence.

SIDE ISSUES

Above this yelp of lights the milk-soft moon
hangs tentative, remains irrelevant. One blot
cornered midcourse in climbing, may be flicked aside,
but not my candle or its finial⁴ that sprouts
above the shuffling of uncertain feet, for mine
are quite decided. What I get, I want,
or I would not be scuffed to a nail-head stop
as foreign gem-grit in an oyster shell, nor yet
be shouldered from the curbstone to the gutter if the gain
did not outweigh the trouble. There are knots
in this rat-tail worth untying which, if not untied,
would hitch me sky-slipped crooked, and irrelevant.



⁴ *Finial*. An ornamental top to a tower or roof; here, most likely, a decoration at the top of a candle-holder.



AFTER HOURS
IN BOHEMIA

IN RESIDENCE

These nights your window
loosens a single wing,
just one reflected glass
cross-hatched against the dark,
creaking
 perhaps
 as if in gladness.

The rectangle behind it glows
as if someone
were there.

No shadow ever seems
to cross it.

The swinging casement
indicates a lack of air,
a longing
 to leap down and dance
among the leaves

which bounds the window
momentarily
above the shadowed park
and lends it a code of slashes.

My heart rejoices
in the glare of the bookstore
on the corner across the street
with its negative blind
rolled down
across the door.

FAÇADE

A rain that takes no pleasure in its falling
ceases, hangs, swells, and sits down on all
outside the costly welcome of an open door and grid,⁵
through which a pair of sullen eyes
kindle no fires in empty pockets. Underfoot
moisture intensifies. The pack behind, all fists,
elbows, and blunted antlers, leans upon the backs
of those out for a walk, scuff slowed to scrape
and full stop by a palisade of backs that go
as far as backs in front allow.

No one may trust the light to dry him,
the marquee to cut the rainfall, now that the wet encases,
battering from overhead proving too primitive.

A voice of rust and tin-can edge of jaggedness
announces law which tolerates no standing around theaters,
though theaters stand where crowds are forced to stop.

Move *them* instead. Move doors and photographs,
the masquerade of loud life at the mud-thick core
of baffled rage. Move all this puff of personality, that steps
and frontage may be kept whatever way
the law would have them. Wetness drives,
immobilizes. Take that theater home. The rest of us
have problems which are getting wet.

⁵ *Grid*. Presumably a grated window of the theater's ticket booth.

TERRORIST

The sun strides bully-fisted through the streets
seeking a head to smash, and where he walks
I shall not go. I dye my limbs a summer brown in dark
of curtained contemplation, lie upon
a long day's waiting as the fan keeps up
a wind in place of wind the sun had killed and hauled
into the court to crumble. As the night
strengthens, I straighten up and dress for peace.

Grains of the dead wind stick to sweat of legs
as footsteps send them from the sidewalk. Suddenly,
an adolescent breeze breaks from the alley mouth,
swaggers in my direction, brushes me,
and flicks the ashes of its father from my arm.
Tomorrow, walls will hide me while the sun seeks out
another wind to strangle, and a will to break.

A STREET OF MANY SHOULDERS



HIS IS A STREET of many shoulders: bare shoulders,
shirted and leather shoulders,
shoulders in suits,
and rope-rough woolen shoulders;
crouched and cunning shoulders,
shoulders spread to bear
wide snows of ermine and rich dyes,
shoulders high-pitched and gabled down to siphon off
despair through drainpipe arms to clench of fingers,
knotted and knuckled on frustration:
shoulders collared up around the ears
braced by the buttress arms and rooted fast
in pockets where the hands, tendriled to change,
take sustenance from keys; shoulders so high
that elbows proxy for them in dispute with cheek,
eye-glassed, bridge of nose, or hat, and shoulders turned
to hanging gardens of indifference,
or sword-hilt shoulders stretched
to the ultimate in all the limited
coffin-cornered outreach of the prude,
and finally, non-shoulders. Such have I,
whose unaccomplished shoulders fail to answer back in kind
to the lecherous lean, the short shove and the ram,
so often that I flinch my eyes aside
to see if I am here, the only one,
walking this street, who has no shoulders.

MUSEUM

So much violence, so much heat and light,
so much search for slaughter, so much greed,
and all without disguise! The quick escape,
the easy egress and the back way up
across the roofs and downstairs into hidden doors.
A shower of sparks, explosions, and a knife,
pursued and pursuer, mesmerized police,
all marked for delectation or for crossing out.
Even the moon is counted off as maverick,
kicked to a corner withering, but still in sight.
Here danger bids us duck and marks our hiding place,
raises a riot or a crowd, and disappears.

AT DEATH OF TIME

Shrinkage, amputation and paralysis.
A highway cut to pier-length by a tape of steel⁶
once as sinuous as river, tense and set
in burnished vengeance. Where the girders marched
the length of loading shed, their feet
are left stuck marching.

Like splinters tightly rooted in the skin,
these pin-stuck people pierce their stance,
sun-wisped to whisper girth, raisined
and dwindled wire twist by the heat and wind
dazed by the river, white in its waiting
at the severed end of progress,
deadened by a sun that hisses out
both height and length, reduces
movement that the face of death
may quiver on the stiffened waters,
as the last tramp pier to its termination
nowhere, as people diminish
yet remain alive.

⁶ *A highway cut.* This poem may concern itself with the derelict truncation of the West Side Highway along the Hudson piers in Greenwich Village. The closed-down elevated highway took decades to demolish. Some piers were also abandoned with buildings and piers in various states of ruin.

PLAYGROUND OF THE LOSERS



OF THESE are losers, tell me of their loss.
They brag the status of the loser, strut
a slight irregularity as if their trim
had dimmed and roughened, puff it up
to height of fashion out of shabbiness,
prate of it counterclockwise, rounding blocks
in widdershins of disarray, display it,
pound it until the pavement, charged with it,
throbs at the height of heartbeat, boast of it
on hoardings in a host of faces washed in it
who sell its slack-lust songs in dark cafes
for nickels in a cup.

What is this loss
that blossoms from their coats? A lack
perhaps, of riches that they do not need
and do not want, an insufficiency
but not a loss. Point out just one
cut out at midriff in a yelling hole
that sucks a rain wind through it. Point out one
listing for a lack of balance to the downward side,
one with a face of gullies packed with salt
deposited by tears, one reckless with
his safety, courting death or injury
through half-planned accident.

I see but one, drum major to his column
or regiment that guards the final remnant of his pride,
a dandy with a smile festooned across the truth,
his ego trussed to saddle of a dancing mare —
with hidden wires and rope. I see but one
pretending conquest at the gate of loss
whose play of fraudulence might well be fraud.

If these are losers, not a single rag of loss
hangs, careless, from a pocket of unseeing eyes.

NEAR ENOUGH TO TEASE

A half an hour from here, a few blocks east,
or near enough to tantalize when walking
dark emptiness to foot-song, when the jangling swells
insistent in the upper skull, throngs in the caverned head
sweat to congested stop. Grotesques and fops converge
on consciousness. Light sweetens and the crackling stars
tingle at back entrances of conversations, fall
at scattered points along my arm, and I am pull
and start. Legs which know their robot routes so well
that I have wandered off course on my way to something else,
once more, swing habit-driven, back and forth.

This time I shall not go. A barrier
shuts out that territory, but not easily. The gate
swings hinge-point singing that there is still time,
still time within the week, within this life. A creak, a grin,
a quick way out, immediate salve should sores break out
from new infection, should old wounds, not yet healed,
require the quick plunge in the forest self,
of dark among bells and goblins, cloistered souls, and shapes
whose closeness dulls the tub-beat of the brain-depth gong.

STARS OVER GROVE STREET

Slum stars
emaciated, underfed, cast
bleary glances on this street
of noise and of impatient cars
which try to dissolve all obstacles
at sound of horn, which bleat
the stars to bleating back
in wavering and senile voices,

all rusted out to rasp and gravel
like the game-leg song
forced up the nightclub steps
and like the voice of one
who has bubbled up on stale
beer breath and overflows
in sprawl upon the sidewalk,
one who beats a surly gong
and gets it back
in gutter winks from overhead.

These stars are fumed
to poverty and stagger on cheap wine,
are driven back into their tenements
by all this falling up
and stumbling down, dithered
half to death on jolts of jazz
that jog, exhausted, back to Basin Street.

Beyond it all
puddles of darkness
and a single light that shouts
a storefront width to hope,
perhaps adventure
and which draws moth-men and whirring women
to the window. Wine in the rinds
of geodes where the stars have sunk
glazed alcoholic, greets them
from amethyst which guards its wearer

against drunkenness. Choral anarchy
and backslap, knowing leers
from pyrite where the stars have made
vitality half-vulgar in gross
expenditure of wealth, hard-gained and early
lost upon moth eyes, on sleazy cloth
turned to hardware
in bitter-snap of sequins,
all counterfeit before a shrine
of quartz, murmuring
within its depths
of stars to come.

MOCHA

The hothead salvos of a maniac
mounted on explosions charged the curb and shattered
the bitterness that lined my throat. A troubled calm
coated my swallowing with quinine strength
when, all at once, a war-plunge, started from the gutter,
ruptured the stuff of space in spurting demons forth
to hurl a smash of crockery through window glass
and scrape the last bitterness from roof of mouth.

How long till I regain that burnished savor,
spread it beetle-back and lustrous
on my outlook, taste it strong
in purpose on the blandness of everyday depends
on frequency of those who scorch the air for several yards,
all to blow up at short catch
of a traffic light in blood spurt stoppage
of an undertone.

FROM THE HANDS OF THE COUNTERMAN

Like a cat prowling
beneath a Pharaoh's throne,

or like a Vestal Virgin
bearing water in a sieve
which leaks only
a drop or two of time,

he comes with a pot
of coffee, pours it
with a steaming smile,

as if to give you
what no saint was offered ever
in the pleuroma⁷ by any angel.

⁷ *Pleuroma*. In Christian theology, a state of absolute fullness or completion.

NIGHT-FROSTED TOMPKINS SQUARE



ERE FEET touch moon-death
chill beneath a mist that frosts
to semblance of cement
beneath a winter web of stunted lamps,
formal beyond formality of Lords,
for even specters

of forgotten courtiers move slowly
as the light that shines through them
makes whisper-density of shape and mass
clouded to a mockery of flesh,

but here the stillness
builds in marble, coffins space,
cold cast immobilizing
breath that even ghosts require
as filling for their half-
begun suggestions of humanity.

The gate is locked
to those who walk here living.
Once inside, a mortal
is an outline of a man
fumed thick with moats,

crowding and separating
as his skeleton dissolves
transparent, as the ground
beneath him frees his feet
from contact and he runs,
becomes the act of running
and remains no more a man
until he breaks the gray gasp
at the shop-lit street.

THE CRUSADER

At prow between two walls
high up among fire-stricken
casement wings, in gilt of glass
and setting sun, your discipline,
the stone folds of your mantle,

resting linked hands of mail
on hilt of broadsword, rooted
in cement and pointing down
to convocation of the ingest streets
that lead your subjects to you
unaware of scant ledge, heavy
with your cross and crowns,
high floors above their discontent.

Look in, back
of your grime-packed eyes,
beneath your casque,
down clerestory aisles in panoply
of battle-shredded banners,
faded rags in rage of boar and eagle
where the heroes lie,
armored and ridged, exactly
as you stand, niched into rectitude
of narrowness above
the swarms of small streets
hived with hooded doors
in all directions, carrying
their hopes of livelihoods
maintained, but not of heaven.

Blind beneath the level
of the boughs laced over asphalt
of tag and dog we keep our eyes
under severe control, prevent escape
to waywardness of open windows
stars, and the cut-throat moon.

More stone than yours
they prowl spasms of crooked streets.
Their granite down all progress
of ascent to cornices, as yours
may only rake the rooftops
of the bank, or ride the long glide
inwards on the stroke of nones.⁸

SIDEWALK CAFE

We have five tables empty.
Are you looking for a table?
This way to the entrance.
Are you missing someone?

People, what are you looking for?
Your eyes are looking,
but not your faces,
searching into corners
under plates, in cups.

Are you looking for an angry motorcycle,
a mounted policeman,
or a unicorn?

If you are looking
for the doorway out,
it is not for sale.

⁸ *Nones*. A 3 p.m. religious service. My guess is that this poem depicts an architectural sculpture, perhaps overlooking Trinity Church in lower Manhattan.

AN OLD DOOR

Gaunt recluse
of a door at top of steep
steps stretching tall within
the shelter of a shallow niche,
an introvert, a derelict afflicted
with a tension which is more
than cavity a doorknob left; roots,
stem, and blossom having been removed,
leaving only the hint-hole
to the other side worn silent
by a long-soured widowhood.

Throughout the day
deep nests of shadows among the bone-thrusts
waking through a ground of stone
pocket their secrecy.

Words lose their way in wilderness
of damp-wool-wadding jaws.
Eyes seek escape in pent eave⁹
points of sunlight patched to lids.

Three faces,
full of what goes on behind them,
hang out their silence
for the eye to break at keystone
of the overhanging arch
above the door, at tops
of barley sugar twists
dividing windows.

The narrow wood retreats,
its shrunken comprehension
squeezed within the tight rule
of pinched quadrilaterals,

⁹ *Pent eave*. An overhanging eave that forms a shelter around a building.

an introvert whose ear at keyhole
cannot rouse, whose censorship
stuffs strands of long mustaches
into granite mouths, locks up
a span of history and stands on guard
keeping time secluded in discarded rooms
that no least sound or sight
of it may pass the hill.

No garbage dumped, or rubbish under law.¹⁰

TIME OF WAITING

On subway platforms
late-hour feet are hammers
of loneliness. Hollow,
as I, this sound
that starts and stops
which in no single step
has called to me.

On subway platforms
empty soda cans
roll to the edge, roll off.

The coming train is full
of you, yet the invisible
feet of aimless hours
are never yours.

Subways are sporadic songs
that no one sings.

¹⁰ *No garbage dumped...* An anti-littering sign posted in front of many New York apartment buildings, and on fences of empty lots.

THE CALL OF CARNIVAL STREET

I hack the rind away, ream out, and hew
the hard core from this flux that lards a cluttering
that cramps and eases for no reason, whet my knife
for lopping branches whipped against my eyes,
renew any axe
in bite on motive. Why this shouldering,
this hip-jut bruising and a cheapjack stance
strike spurts of phrase and imagery down at dark of head
only a nut-crack buffeting will tell.

The smell of challenge wakes upon the smash
of light and crowd-push. Massiveness of block
to roadway ruffles beast as growls unroll,
breaking to words and phrases in a snarl that hangs
a thought-width from my face. My sword sinks through,
releasing strands that flutter in a whip and flash
which I remember and which fall in place
on walls, on table tops, on shoulder spans, or drop
in full form, scum inscribed within my cup.

THE MOMENT OF TRUTH

Knives in the sun,¹¹
half hidden in the hands
slipped from the pocket,
in display, in pride,
threat hovering.

How much blood
has been shed here,
Park of a hundred faces
and as many years
in individual lives?

Danger lurks behind
the lattices of shadows;
quick feet and sudden steel.

The bongos romp
over wreckage of stale honor.
Danger in cramped lives,

in language strafing
with syllables.

How many lives
have been taken here,
Park with a thousand faces
and as many leaves,
blowing for — how long?

How many atoms
in the steel? Quick death!
A never-changing sun.

¹¹ Knives in the sun. This is likely another poem about Tompkins Square, where an altercation between Puerto Rican youths and the hippies, musicians, the Hare Krishna acolytes, the local Ukrainian immigrants, and the police, reached a point of riot in 1966-1967 about the use of the park, a conflict which exploded again in the 1980s. The stabbing of a news reporter by a young Puerto Rican roiled the police and the city government.

PAROCHIAL OBSESSION

Sleeved brown
in sooty brick, this steeple
lifts a hand
furled into a fist
that shouts imperatives
of index finger

lifted to specific sky
directly above the church
and nowhere else.

Why there,
and only there? with obdurate
persistence, silence
casts a vote of affirmation
and upholds the gesture.

No sky
but that which has been chosen
suffers scrutiny
as fertile ground
for maturation
of a miracle.

Follow
the pointing finger
up,
 up and up
in burrowing through blue
on climb beyond the highest
cirrus station.

Nothing moves.
A jet trail froths.

AFTER HOURS IN BOHEMIA

The sign swung,
singing tunelessly
and bade me dance.

How shall I dance in this street
of shrouded windows
in front of those disapproving
slots in walls
under a mortuary lamp?

Something scrambles up ahead,
slides, slewing sideways
to my feet; a handbill
promising a play that folded
just two nights ago.

I only walk this narrowness
seeking the sky-burns
on the night left
by the careless stars,

looking hopefully
for ghosts up there,
for there are none down here.

EAST FROM HERE

Domes of umbrellas
sailing past the door
with a semblance
of regularity:

palanquins
crests of camel humps
howdahs,
pinnacles of god-carts.

Curl of the ram's horn.
Coffee dying slowly in the cup.

A drift of rain,
a tide of branches blowing from the east.

Raga, bales of silk
from Basra,
soaked and soiled.

A high ring
run from ear through ear.

What will become of us?

ROOFTOP ORATORS



ARGOYLES SQUAT on gutter edge of roofs.
Stone heads pack full of stone in which
 no matter stirs,
broken to action by electric flickering.
Eyes bulge against the world and
 keep it back,
unsorted in raw jumble of prolixity.

Life stumbles through the streets
as drain-clog plentiful as rain,
weighted with litter in a night-howl flood,
bringing its abundance to the Gargoyle
who consumes all that roars down on him
and lets it shout its unassimilated bulk and flow,
unaltered, through the waste-course of his gullet.

Beneath this deluge we are almost drowned,
head crushed in roof-pitch wash-off and its thickening,
which rose unprocessed to a granite head,
and equally disorganized, poured, uncontrolled,
through lips dragged open by a hanging under-jaw
slung from a conduit mouth.

CELIA AT THE BUS STOP

Her motionless face,
just present, with no hair anywhere
showing to soften it. All of it
back inside the large scarf
worn like the veil of a nun
as she wears her eyelids
down over anchorite eyes,

but her secret
creeps with their brownness
stealing glimpses until
she sees that somebody
notices, and orders them
back like wayward children;

brown eyes as shields
to keep her fun for sure
from seeping through
their opaque roundness,

yet a nip of joy
comes still, a low glimmer
through that gingerbread
molded for the taking
of her man.

SIPPING OUZO

The cream cloud
draws apart, the shock,
concussion at the root of skull,
in chill that spreads
throughout the veins. A flavor
sticky sweet and sickly,
so it seems,

as down,
forever down a freezing depth
of stars away into a void
of silver, you tumble,

helpless until the largest
of all the stars that prickle
through the murk explodes,
or so it seems,

and spits up
climbing trails of bubbles
heaping high in shaking mounds
of foam that trickles
from the stem of goblet
to the table,

as it seems.

You try to lift the full weight
of your iron head
and drop it on your arm.

HOUSE MONSTERS

Those little pets; their sleek hair
shining and neatly groomed,
their claws clipped,
rapping across the floor
and a sheen of tears
across their amber eyes —

When they sit up
on their compact haunches
with their out-thrust forepaws
festooned with strands of diamonds,

or with both paws clapped
to the sides of a heaping compote,
you would do well to be cautious.

There might be something
wrong at the center of that
delicious fudge, or the fruit
might be off its proper savor
or the cheese might harbor
a wink of ground glass
waiting. Be careful

of the begging claws, the sharp
incisor. Somewhere there might
be poised the glitter
of a hungry knife.

NOVEMBER AT ROCKAWAY BEACH

Rows of little bungalows
with boards blinded, broken windows,
stand in files along the beach
battered by the wind and sand.

There she limps steadily
with unflagging determination,
squinting up at the race
of scuds, her wet skirts
nagging at her ankles,
her imitation leather coat
sprouting a spurious fur.

She scoops up treasure
offered daily by the ocean,
fights with the whip of hair
across her face. Unconscious
of the subtle odor of decay
and death, she mumbles
wordlets gummed together
into the falsehood of that fur.

SUBWAY EXIT

It had to be he.

He was always like that;
always going away;
always his long
familiar back;
his giveaway gait,

going,

while keeping his face
where he was going,

keeping his identity
untapped,

just as he was at this moment;

ten steps upward
and ahead of me,

keeping his face in sun
and street for recognition.

Was I to crush against
the wall and pass him?

to call out his name
as if to spin him backward?

or watch his back
receding —
if it were he?

HESPERUS

Last night I saw you.
John Berryman, braving an
after-thought
of sunlight with a splintering glare,

whistling insidiously
through the scurrying bands
of chimney-top ventilators.

With several of your experimental
fists, you struck
at a rind of moon.

Still at it, aren't you,
dancing like a child denied!

Unsatisfied with all
your hard-earned varieties,
you still insist,

inhabit a tear
and, inside it, try on
a multitude of lives, then dim
and nearly drown,

but the next sunset
brings you back, spiked and scaly.

That nail, which last night
hammered between my eyebrows,
was never Venus.

MIDSUMMER MANIA

For Eunice Wolfgram

Yes, lady, we are all agreed
that certain women
may transform themselves
into were-wolves, nuns, parking lots
and grand pianos
when the moon ripens
with unbearable fragrance;

that it is they,
who have access to those pills
which make the darkest hair
burn purple, streaked with green
by daylight, without assistance
from color television,

and that there are
yet other women, trained
to hornpipe their homes
into holocausts;

the same,
whose children's skulls,
bristle antlers through their hair,
when the footfalls
on their right
plant briars.

By all means, yes,
incredible woman.

Yes is a chemical reaction.¹²

¹² *Yes is a chemical reaction* was an advertising slogan for Chemical Bank.

HOLDING ON

He had laughter
tucked into his cuffs
as he stood on the corner
by the lamp post
with both hands clamped
on his bicycle handlebars,
until that one moment
when a sneeze caught him
and they both flew up in his face,

when the bicycle shuddered,
stood tall on its wheels
and rattled into traffic
on its own,

while the sun
stood up on the pedals
shouting brightness —

blindly alone.

IN THE MIRROR

Your face, square, sure
of itself from over my shoulder,
peeks out beside mine
from behind my reflection.

How you do it I shall not
strain to imagine, but you are there
like a low-grade fever.

Not all the time,
but fading until almost
nonexistent. Then strengthening
again to almost a greater
reality than mine.

I wonder
how often, if ever,
others see you there;
if sometimes
you are visible to others,
but not to me,

or visible at times
when I am not,
and if so,
how much of you

how much?

BACKGROUND MUSIC

He has always had a few
loose pieces in his head, and sometimes
they jingle loudly.

They are not about
to fall out of his ears,

to bore through his skull
and dance in his hair,

nor will their place
of confinement split in two
hinged halves

and rattle
like a castanet,

but his speech
may be accentuated often
by an agitation
of bells,

[as] yours may, [too].

I disregard them.

A MEDITATION ON ANDRÉ BRETON

For Breton, a picture
was always a window opened
on something,
but the question was —
on *what*?

For me. a poem
is always a hole bitten out of,
or smashed through most of,
the middle of a sheet of paper,
obscuring something,
and the question remains —
of *what*?

but somehow there is always
someone
lacking in the energy
to drive the fist,
the strength in the jaws
to bite,
but who,
instead, prefers to scribble
on that surface,
leaving it unmolested,

as if whatever had been written there would substitute for that which remained behind it, and the question is — for *what*?

THE PLAINTIFF

Slouching with one shoulder
raised higher than the other
on the courtroom bench,
slumped into the notion of hiding,

her small, pinched face
peeks out through a rift
in the long black
mourning of her hair.

She listens attentively
as the lawyers condemn her past;
the drugs, the drifting
almost as if they must be
speaking of someone else.

Who was that young woman
anyway, who so long ago
bought speed in the parking lots
along the highway?

Surely not the owner
of this loneliness,
this pain that drags
her mouth down sidelong,
of this pixie face
and its doughty
experimental smile.

ON MONDAY

When the wind
wears the clothes
which I hang
on the line,

the wind looks
much better than I
when I wear them.

An actor of talent,
that wind!

DESCENDING THE SPIRAL STAIRCASE

How would you descend
from the pulpit
if you were the priest?
Would you turn your back
to the congregation and feel
at the air with one foot
experimentally, and with both hands
on the railings, back down
with your mind in your feet
one foot by the other
while the worshippers yawn,

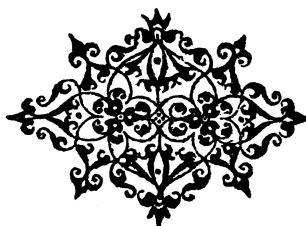
like a house painter
on a ladder
which he cannot trust?

Or would you, like a man of God,
be done with all caution and descend
the steps as if they were a sturdy staircase
instead of a grosgrain

ribbon of cast iron slung
high on the air, treading
its delicacy with a seeming courage
even if your balance
might play the traitor?

Can you observe yourself
as if from a safe position
and watch the subject walking
down the steep spiral of narrow,
scarcely-guarded stairs with ease?
You are practiced, a steeplejack,
and also you, the attentive watcher.

Follow yourself closely with your eyes
until you take the final step
to safety on the level
where your nerve collapses.





AT BREAKING POINT
OF SKY

THE GEM DWELLER

I hear you
towering. Galena breaks
beneath your surface
coming up to eyes that steel
against defilement.

Quartz bursts your smile
to drifts of sun
through seep of fog
to fractured brain-wrack whiteness.

Malachite mellows
along your summering
at creep of eye as mischief
of a brilliance tossed
by leaves to rollick
barefoot on the rain-sprung moss
and slow.

At sleek of calcite,
rivering grease wavered
rhymed downwards in a burn
of oil over grief of glass,

I know that you heal
all that you touch with unguent
of the moon as if the selenite
that creams your voice
had never been sufficient
to inform me of the sly-glance
sweetness of you, had not come
pearl in the night-warmth
of your words.

I hear you
inch by inch
 castled to share
to send me self-down wandering
through depths of stone
through grape-toothed ways
of amethyst, and then
alone, to climb the long road
back into your eyes.¹³

STABS FROM THE SUN

How is protection
from your hard-hurled blast
to stand against the hay-hot
sweetness of your summering?

Windows and doors will drink it
in until the gilded bird
creeks round a bitter arc
and shrieks a moonlight
withering throughout the night
leaving a knot of dying
where my breath stopped short.

¹³ This poem, a catalog of gemstones, shows the influence of Holland's mentor, Ree Dragonette. See also "When Stones Have Shed Their Skins."

DARK AUTUMN

Dark strands of hair
across the walks. Torn hair
streaming from an undertow of Autumn.

Grains of dust flow
in continuous tresses, scud
the surfaces of paving. Afternoons
weaken with overwork.

Beneath the benches
desperation tears at tufts
and pulls them out.

Tell me that no ghost
sits and combs black filings
from the thinning of its Autumn hair
and strews them on the ground.

The march of pale lamps
baleful in the dusk, blink
into command where madness sits
flailing battered wisps
across the moon and drums
the broken slats of benches
with an Autumn mind.

WHEN STONES HAVE SHED THEIR SKINS



WHO CAN SAY there are no souls in stones,
and who can look at Kunzite
and say that they have bodies,
gauze ripped from the garments of the sun,
a plumage shed by luminous
transparent birds, spent splinters of the morning,

mineral and miracle, held at its climax
in a sheath of stone,
gossamer against its ending?

Youth, northern, frangible inside
drops of blue opal as if dawn had bled
its earliest moments, as if clots of sky
concealed in stone, had been preserved
before the daylight killed it;

all the weathers of the world in quartz;
mist-depths of white sand-shallows in aquamarine
on frost of breath inside a shell of stone
take life from light and strain at carapace
until the day its long endurance breaks
before eternal pressure from within.
Who would be surprised? Not even God
would have expected it?

What must the winds bear up
when stones have hatched:
what wings shall fan
the cold fires of the stars
or beat to warmth the white
heart of the moon
when stones have shed their skins?

NOT AS THE CRIPPLED TREE

Not for you the dagger-cast of ice
slipped as a severed sleeve
and sloughed to earth. Too stout of trunk are you
to wear decay as ornament
and molder picturesquely in a swamp.

If tree, how much more tree are you than branch,
thick as the shank of forest starveling;
how much more than twig,
for twig-like, you have slit the moon across,
that sudden wind, would with a flourish
split it halved, could rob that roundness
of its structure in a snap,
sparked from the sprout of premise?

You rob the hollow curve down dark
of half-mind heritage. The old
unquestioned formula evolves,
encrusts in rough of bark, becomes
leafed with a splash of lenses
in which sunlight plays magic,
which you know can wound, and know
too well how deeply, too well
to dangle talismans to blind the birds,
too thoroughly to let them
lance the stuff of self.

THE VALLEY OF LITTLE THUNDERS

Something matures,
enlarges here, drinks its vitality
from moisture,
develops a precarious ability to stand,
has yet to get about
without stumbling,
catching on objects
when passing them or tilting
heavily to the side and falling,

wallows as if without legs
and revolves in its den
among the mountains, digging it deeper
and enlarging its circumference.

In some uninhabited hollow,
skirted by ridges and made safe
by the highest hills, whose spines
are roads, blocked in
by scrub and woodland, this continuous
ripening buzzes its gain
in weight and size in a low roar,
muffled as if deeply buried.

Vibrations, running underground
beneath the ridges,
excite the small leaves of the undergrowth
into a nervous fluttering,
then every tree stands as if paralyzed
and the grass is untouched by wind.

Ask nothing
about anything you notice
here. Your ignorance is sacred.

LEAF-SURF AND STONE

Waves of feathers spatter on the walls,
in fern-dance boiling, leap to window ledge.

Waves of feathers spatter on the walls
where eyes that own the windows watch their falls,
retreats and pounces when the frond-spray calls
to room depths, scattering past wind-world edge.

Waves of feathers spatter on the walls
in fern dance boiling, leap to window ledge.

THE ROAD AHEAD

It is wet. It must be,
drinking the blue
from the sky as it does,
and flexing its breadth,

but as you approach,
it pulls apart
and your wheels are dry;

the blacktop,
a quote from a sunblast,

and incredibly boring.

GATHERING STORM

The message bobs
on the green air
of early evening;

a tight swarm of querulous
innuendoes leads nowhere,
dips and ascends,

pauses at ear level,
flirts with the treachery
of nettles, withdraws
among the lowest leaves.

The thunder flexes muscles,
waits. It is time that
the foothills were breaking
the last frail tissue
of sleep and stirring.

The full growth
of the mountains
will roll over later.

ONLY FOR BIRDS



NLY FOR BROKEN necklaces of birds
severed in flight and rearranged,
new-linked, though loosely locked
my sky-filled eyes well up
against the light as if the high-tide
tears were slowly rising,
as if upon their gloss

a mystery had been reflected
confused by tilt of head,
by shift of shadow, lost
in the hardening of reticence.

Clouds cross the cornea,
now open to the easy loyalties
of hosting birds, bead shot
through grain of iris
as if lashes never had flattened
beneath the sluice of acrid waters,
as if the clouds of birds had always
traversed space that once flashed
fitfully with wings and swords,
palladia burnt out upon the idiot night.

Not now the Gorgon
in the hour of truce
in face cast up to evening
some day to be as crazed with wickering
of furrows left behind
on nettled skin laid over ache:

hunger beneath the boles
of rot-soft trees and loneliness
along clay thirst and dust of leaves
as once before when all the sap
of springs and creeks lay dead.

Medusa sleeps at dusk.
Her eyes no longer mine, close
with the density of darkness, liberate
my eyes to wander with the random
birds, to float decisive
in the wake of clouds.

SEA BRANCH IN SAND

Who lies half-buried in the sand?
Whose arm and shoulder curve as a swimmer's,
sun-deep in underglow of moon-wilt silvering,
pulling at tug of grains packed into
will of weight upon it?

That day when sudden wrench
shall work it loose, an apparition,
massaging aching muscles, will be seen
to bare bone under sheath of satin
to a cautious wind whose rub
and polish wears the roughness from the sea-soft bough
to flesh of Naiad, till a wave-wrought Daphne stands
naked in branch crooked reach of limb as shimmering silk
creeps over coral endodermis brought
to dawn-shell over blood-reach
of the sun through wood.

VARIATIONS

When the frost settles
on his whiskers and quickens them
into the stiffness of sensitized rods,
as fault-finders, catchers
of unwarranted lint, or as critical
reviewers of the wind,

the faint chill of a phantom worry
crawls inside my bones
but on the next thaw of his whiskers
exits as a ghostly sweat.

That is why I am never
convinced clear through
with a cold that would break my bones,
by the freezing of a residue
of doubt within them

for, after all, it is only frost
coated to the softness of amiable hair.
There is always somewhere a fugitive sun
which is prey to innumerable whims.

LIGHT WIND AND A LOCOMOTIVE

Sharp gray darkening.
Apple-green the evening air
along the margins. From far
across the valley floor
a long thin wail
raveling on a rise of wind
from incredible distances

as underneath
the ambiguous warning of the locomotive,
of the premature evening star
smudged boot-prints make
a mark of expectation
on the sky above the mountains
staining into a line
of promises somewhere
for someone else.

STRING FIGURES IN A GROVE



OOKED OVER outspread hands string
flashes, darts,¹⁴
forms squares and rhomboids up
leap-starts through grove,
whose hands display cross twigs and sticks
loose-bound to intersecting points of buds
blurred to excitement,
through a slit of smooth
and pliant youth laced into saw-slip of diagonals?

Burnt briar and blackthorn
caught at crotch, jointed and link bent. Rood-screen
mottled in a fiddler's glade, all of its grasses
bristled high, pricked up for listening
at tip of every blade for sounds of sun.

Birds quiver at urgency of mind-bolt nudge.
Nothing has crosses behind the fretwork,
and to while the time to variety
of stem and shade, those hands
which loop and pluck the string
are threaded and prepared to rush apart,
lash eyes with new designs
within which constant winds
act out a new concerto.

¹⁴ Strong flashes, darts ... The patterns of leaf, branch, and twigs is compared to the game of "Cat's Cradle."

CHALLENGE

So it is snow
in the throat again,
forced there,

driven almost to the threshold
of bronchial blockade
against my own breathing
in its lunge against invasion.

Snow! A weapon —
and I have none but obstinacy —
surges, speeded into like
of gust to that
which backs it downward
to its starting place.

It is snow
ice crisp of air
as knuckle-duster of the wind
that reviles me.

If it were not
for this force at lock
of horn and brace
of shoulder with equivalent
boldness, I would no longer
be propped into this
upright posture

and this walk would only
be another recital
of feet counting cracks
that intercept routine.

AT BREAKING POINT OF SKY

The blown-glass evening rings.
Sky strains, tightened
to the limit of its elasticity,

and high along the cold curve
hums the ghost tone
of a bell at after-strike,

the long taut sound
of endurance at the end
of stretch, at weakening
when silhouette of spire or chimney
is enough to rupture it,

when an incisor star
might tremble once too much
and jar against
the blister top that shields us
from the light that weighs
against it, thinning it.

A single word
dispersing silence might
unseat that star.

More deadly
than a shower of glass blades
is whatever force a rupture
in that sky might loose on us.

POSSIBLY ONE DAY

A galloping meadow
never gets anywhere in spite
of all the speed it means.

Bounding, unaware
that it has been created
thwarted,

it hurries
its high hair over earth
that lay beneath it,

but not one inch
to the better
by delight in travel.

AND FINALLY THE MOON

Here it comes
almost too strong
for the hiding
of the clouds that hold it
in a stubborn
maternal grip.
At last,
it melts them
breaks away from them arrogant, silent,
out on its empty own.

A MEDITATION ON SPACE

Seemingly there are several types of spaces. There is the space in which all of the galaxies are set up in business,

the space called *pleuroma* in which the myths play out their old stories in perpetual re-runs,

the space from which you fall from the edge of phenomenal existence when you die,

the space crammed into our narrow conception of space and time,

the space which is the setting of a dream.

Put a three-dimensional object or person in it and it is *place*. These spaces all are One and Holy.

SUMMER NIGHT-WALK

Disturbance along the quietest
of country roads; a branch flutters
its leaves, reveals its catch
of descending stars, slowly
coming down between them,

maintaining dogged brightness
among the fickle greenish lights
of the fireflies, risen to meet them.

The straight line drawn
by the coupled headlong lamps
along the distant highway,
and here the comforting
crunch of gravel
holding these feet to earth.

ON MONDAY

When the wind
wears the clothes
which I hang
on the line,

the wind looks
much better than I
when I wear them.

An actor of talent,
that wind!

PLEASE COME HOME

You are only a clean
little clump of cloud

out there

on the horizon. Cute,
you look kind of nice like that:
puffed up and fuzzy,
keeping the wide blue
at the edge of the sky
too busy to be a bore.

A pleasant change for both of us:
a time for me to get my darkness
going,

filling up with flecks of gold
and whirling into a tight twist
spun at such speed
it almost buzzes in my eyes;
the way I like it.

You never did,
or ever showed me yours,
but hated mine,
prided yourself on being blunt
about it, begged me to throw it out.

Yours was a thorny hideaway
crammed to the top
with thumbtacks, turkey claws
and tire treads,

the kind of hutch
you have to run away from
to the horizon
to puff up for a while on your ego
and float or ooze oily
as if with innocence, maybe to fool
the idle and the romantic
until the air cools and you flatten.

Then you have to return
if only to shake the flakes of rust
from the spikes on your coffee table.

Of course, I miss you,
if looking at you in outline
packed solid with double-parked cars
and underfed dogs is what I mean,
or bearing one of your usual lectures
still discussing itself in circles
above an empty setting at a table.

THEM

At the melting of night
into morning,

gnawing intermittently
at infant flesh
or dawn,

like psychic chiggers:
stars.

IN THE STRENGTH OF THE MOON

So now you have seen them
where the driveway swings close
to the house:

the slim high spears
planted among the pebbles
like staves,
the swinging lanterns,

a spread of antlers
which almost snagged among the branches,
beak-thin and curved,
the probing muzzle of a fox
frozen
in the sight of the floodlights
on the porch,

by the loss of identity,
remaining just enough
to break the paralysis,

to continue beyond it
and into the woods.

Why, then,
do you look at me that way?
Perhaps you never should have come here
and have seen them. Maybe because
I was with you
when they passed the house
and it was my driveway.

NOVEMBER

The lightness and delicacy
of dried leaves stretched tight
across a spread of twigs
which terminates in crushed claws;

this after sundown
often. Sometimes floating
on the surface of my hair,
fumbling at the root
of my skull or grazing my cheek
as with the touch
of a whisper
saying, *Now*,

come now.

I course maps with a finger,
count costs,
consider the calendar
and cower in forgetfulness,
but even under all of that,
hard knuckles
and the dried claws
of the dark against the shuddering
glass in the kitchen window

rasps the old hunger
and more of an echo
of a still-resounding ache alive;
I want you

and the nights
are afraid for me.

NEW ENGLAND OVERCAST

It sweats outside
today.

There is such a stinginess
with water now

that even mature drops
must be husbanded

and only a damp sigh
may be expected
from clouds.

Remember
how on such days as this

you were so quick
to send me
back to my center of the swirls
of fog that edged out
in feelers
from under the bed,

how accurate
your timing
when you retrieved me
for the sun's return

while madness
was settling in the folds
of the curtains

ready to drip the night
away
with hammers.

THIS FROWSTY AUTUMN

This autumn has done
nothing whatsoever. The leaves
stand idle. They speak no carrot
nor paprika. Holding their summer
green, now out of style, they wait
until the proper moment
for loosening.

By then they will
have been filmed over green
with golden brown
as if garnished with furniture polish
drying ever inwards from
the edge until they dry up
and fall away,
their patience ended.

SURF AND SNOW

I look beyond you to where the waves
build up black through a mist of snow,
then, swelling smoothly about the shoulders
of the jetty, fall apart gently
into curds of foam, fold inwards and retire,
sinking submissively to rise once more.

They do not carp at me, scold me
for my long gaze, following
their comfortable routine. The gulls
squeal to one another through
the driving snow, blown white
through the droplets of the spray.
Their chief concern does not occupy
itself with whose eyes ride the winds
upon their private trajectories.

Look now, the fledgling crests cap over
a cluster of chilling bottles. Spume
flies above the hot chocolate dispenser,
shrouding the soda tap with puffs
of prodigious plumes. My eyes be-spelled
by thickening layers of green with lace
of cream throughout, now find themselves
compelled to seek a lumpy freighter
laboring at the horizon, with the every-day
of her weighty cargo and getting nowhere.

I hear you speak, and I ask
that the waves subside. I turn to you,
half-blinded with the hammering
of the winds, with spray, and you
tell me that I unsettle you
by looking at you, that I am
indifferent to all else.

I cannot make you see this ocean
of my very own, the majestic desolation
of these unencumbered sands,
and of the imperious gouging of the tides.

A DAY FOR A GREAT ADVENTURE

Another day for a deep plunge
into the swell of a great adventure.
I shall be ready, but the waters
are slow to rise. I shall look
at the conformations of the clouds
and the mist on the horizon, the attitudes
of the scavenger sea-birds
and the shadows on the shoals
of the fish on which they feed.

This is all preparation.
I do nothing throughout these months,
but listen to the slats in the boardwalk
talking underneath my tread,
clean my fingernails on the edge
of a clamshell and avoid the searching
reach of a light along the beach
from an approaching beacon

and always turn the sharpness
of my focus inward to where
the great whelk¹⁵ in the climb
and descent of his spiral
nurtures the genesis
of all sublime adventures,
as is this,
and every other poem,
and as the moonlight
on the surf exploding.

¹⁵ *Whelk*. A predatory mollusk with a spiral shell.

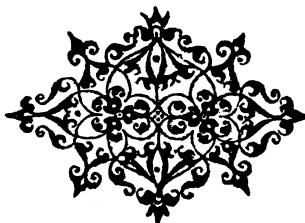
THE FIRE-BREATHING SPRING

Goodbye, Winter. Who knows
when I shall ever see you?
The Spring's hot breath
will blow all of you away.

When shall I once more
feel the cleanliness of cold,
the muscles compact
like springs wound tight
and sleep which eliminated
the ambling nights that dawdle
and keep no commitment
or bring the thin dawn fluting
to my chimney early?

Winter,

I shall miss you sorely,
the tinkle of your midnight skies.





IN SUDDEN SECRET

THE BRAGGART HILT

Theft from a carousel, fist-filling things;
snatches of talk, the urgency of beat,
the flash of steel a smile
 in slivering windows, bone
locked into posture crusted false in elegance.

I could be a charlatan and like it, be myself
and like it even more. Trombone
on the rocks, a dash of gin, and wit
salted among the sprite-lamps could be some of me
or all, mocking the jingling of this street
 with dancing selves
were I not so determined to have none of it.
The braggart hilt beneath my hand is cold.

Chilled trumpet splashed with brandy in a ready throat
is twinge of malice in my mouth,
assassinate.

DRAUGHTS OF CACOPHONY

I arrived here robbed,
nothing inside me, darkness in my head
and leaking from my eyes. Even the ground I walked upon
was stolen. Thus I came to fill the vastnesses inside
my limited domain. I swallowed clash
of store with store or restaurant in display
of beckoning and from the grossness of feigned oddity
gained in solidity. I snatched at staves
swung at the thresholds of percussive palaces
and kept them for a final hitting back.
Crazed to rawness by vulgarity, I covered burn
with sting that counter-bit, made of each sense
a wall against myself which hid my emptiness
with temporary surfaces for feet and fists
to batter with the rhythms of revenge.

THE VOICE OF NOW

This *now* has nailed me to a swelling *must*
and though it may run bramble-ragged
over everything, no one will notice it
until I tell. My bell would crack a tower in two
if I should wait while resonance grows richer, for this *now*
is loud within my mouth. Its sudden taste
is iron touched by ice and jolt of shock
that loosens grip on words and words will go
smashing the slats of louvers as the stroke upon
my gong-side kicks my whole compulsion up and over,
sending it ton-stroke down upon another *now*
not quite so sharp. This *now* has nailed me
to a swelling *must*. I shall be torn upon this growth unless
it snaps at bell-tongue sundering when *now* has struck.

IN A YEAR'S TURNING

Oh may my heart's truth
Still be sung
On this high hill in a year's turning
— *Dylan Thomas "Poem in October"*

When once we came
in on one another,

and hung there,

if only,
but for that moment
until the rope wore through,

dropped us,
and sent us sprawling

and snarling,

all was our silence then,
my love: our seasons,
deceptions,

scrapings from years past
lodged edgewise
in our throats.

No arguments.
No lies. No insults. The truth
roared from noon
rampant,
Home!

But Autumn
was already fetus
in the belly of August;

in terror,
to be later dropped
split open and divided,

in our course of custom.

WHEN BRASH WORLDS LIVE

All the grotesque, bedizened and bizarre occasions and their causes, all who wear a minted excess of accepted oddness, run a clatter-pace about me, while a minimum of strangeness settles at my side, becomes more colorful than any one of them.

Thorn-print phantoms of my own inhabit air,
walk skull-tops hoof-bright swiftly over crowds,
hover on chuckle at the obvious rind encasing vanity.

I know them both. As single entities
they tire in tawdriness, when intermixed
they swirl, a bold stew for the hunger hour
that pours untempered chili down its loneliness.

RUBBISH TO BURN

Here in this jungle din I keep my void
for you to fill, though that with which you stuff
its vastness will not stop the crumbling and the final fall
of walls surrounding it, yet paper lace, plastic and paint
in fluorescent scorch are cargo which will be no loss
should they be loosed upon abyss when floor dissolves
abandoning its load. A hoard of trash
is better fare for pockets than a blood-warm gem
at threat of robbery, more thorough than petty snatch
which tweaks the muscles of your hands. Your penny gear
totaled upon the pin-top tilt on which I live,
I keep to jettison. Since I have lost
my ember gift of God, I heap your rubbish high.
My looting gains me bulk to spend of space, to feed
my trap-door luck.

ON THE MIDWAY



EREIN STALKS honesty: a prancing hag
splashed with a play of gauds
 on upraised arm
lifted to taunt the long-unneeded moon
with ribaldries; who cuts the night sky
 with her knuckles,
sharp with paste set in a knock-jaw outrage,
 aureate in brass
upon a talon curved to gouge, if gouging gets
the slim essentials of her sustenance,
power and the skill to blind,
but not much more. Her candor is my strength.

Her hawk head tilts an imp-inch to my laughter.
We have added each other's totals till we understand
each other as no one ever will. I know
how soon I shall be traipsing through her property.
Too long the week-lag for the wine-deep pluck
of string bass stolen easily in areaways to be a memory.

 One beat
calls for another, calls for light in spring
of carnivore across a meager street, for drifts
 of idlers seething
at the curb. More shove than motion, more remnants
 than a feast,
yet many a meal of gobbets from a chain of halts,
of conversations, and a cup of tea were mine for cheating.

She could plunder me,
but never has, for I have robbed her first.
I know the ripest areas for lingering.
She keeps her harlot hand cupped for my change. I drop
a button in, dislodge a diamond nested
 in her rhinestone swirls.
I know which socket grips are wearing out.

BREAKING THE CURSE OF BLANKNESS

Your eyes,
from the darkness
and the contours of your face,
drawn by my stare
and into both of mine,
where, pupil to pupil,
they were matched and mated;
dusk upon dusk
and into a quivering
rinse of gray, blue, green
and the sand-warmth of shallows,
while inside,
and all about my head,
your voice resounded.

Your eyes,
floating on the glare
of the desk lamp that guarded
the muteness of paper,
which paralyzed my pen
captured my compulsive straining
and reduced your voice
to a faint sigh
from the dark of another waking,
and the paper wrote me.

IN SUDDEN SECRET

That maverick nerve
that one, dear-waking bristle,
shudders throughout these
limping matins to the hum
that is your listening.

Now in the silence
of your absence neither of us
speaks, though both of us
exchange awareness as easily
as words, when the stark
hour invites us.

It is but natural now
to count the pulse of silence,
to lean into the aura
of another and, if the quickness
of the eye receive
the perked scratch of a smile
like crook in lilt of frisking
eyebrow winking from over
shoulder through the dark
to know,

and in that knowledge
love in solitude,
therein rejoicing, as if in cell
in rogue nerve
in collusion,
and in sudden secret.

OPTICAL ILLUSIONS

My bones are bare now;
gnawed down by moonlight
and picked clean.

They are flashes,
a scarce width more
than flickerings
of recognition.

When you sort them,
they know your fingers:

the silver bowl,
the icy water,
their convulsed appearance
on its surface,
and in your hunger.

WHERE TENSION IS

To perch upon a threat, from dare to dare
I move in all the moments of my sitting.
The wan clock tires with ticking. Accumulated strength
rears to the ultimate event.

No longer now
the sly sulk sliding under fire escape.
I strut a parallel to danger, quick to hide
the hot jest flickering with every step,
the bite of triumph in my teeth.

COLLECTING THE ECHOES

In the scarce time it takes
to inhale and exhale air,
you dropped your body, which lay
on the speaker's platform
like a rag doll, discarded,
which no one wanted;

limp, helpless, an imitation
of a man. The gun voice that shouted
you so loudly reverberates
within my ears, and you,
as the perfect flame you are,
looking down on your insulted
body, with an eyebrow
lifted with the brutal shock,
haunts me, and will
until you become the lost
shell of a memory in mutilated air
which I cannot remember.

LEFT-OVER LAUGHTER

For Richard

They say that you walked
right off the edge of the world,
while they also tell me
that the world has no edges
from which to drop,
(although mine has,
on several levels)

and that means that I
cannot call you back or twist
my fingers inside your collar
as if to drag you back;

you would resent it
and would look at me severely
with your mouth tightened
into a thin line of vexation,

and properly affronted,
from your appearance
of posture, you would walk
off the edge of the world again,
from the edges of space and time,
of sight and sound,

with the loose ends
of the wood shavings
of your laughter left hanging
from every budding bough.

THE ACHE OF EAVESDROPPING

Voices press in upon me;
I carry them, snarled and unsorted
at the base of my skull.

It is as if I were
constantly pressing my ear
to a keyhole
that kept back all but the gist
of a conversation.

Somewhere
at a known address
in another city,
details lie scattered
about on a table
in a locked and abandoned room.

Day and night, explorations
of breezes finger them
to nearly verbal agitation.

This I find almost unendurable.
How far and for how long
can anyone stretch hearing?

NOT THIS TIME

No,

no! You are not
going to spring at me out of the wall
again.

Tonight
you are not
going to clap your countenance

full-face, three quarters,
and profile, all
at one glance,
you Cubist, against my eyeballs.

Not tonight,
please!!!
This is not a permanent
prohibition. I ought to be
used by now
to surprises
with you in my repertoire
of hallucination,

but not tonight. My nerves
clamor for a respite,

and that hyper-fidelity
recording of your voice
makes a single second's extra use
of the resonance inside my skull

for a speaker,
I shall go mad
and lose you.

SO LONG FORGOTTEN

I was not ready for you,
when you told me
that you were returning.

I wanted,
did not dare not
say no,

that I refused to see you,

ice-picking an old thirst
into an overflow
of loneliness,

said yes, met you,
and relearned a long
forgotten torment,

that yours is a sweetness
that lingers, stinging
in the throat,

that a dim fear of rejection
whets an edge
on your demureness,

that it cuts me,

and that my love for you hurts
more than grief.

ALL ABOUT EDDIE

When he writes
the walls around him
blaze like a gauze of sunlight

as when it stretches
in slant sheets
downward to the moss
untorn by branches

through an endless
flow of motes,
his musings dazzle
in their up and on,
on streams of brilliance,

humming of that
which ought or should be,
which was
and is

with an insatiable appetite
for oats
sown wild!

THE MOST UNWHOLESOME TAX

Those who would dangle
a threadbare gratitude
 like the worst
of the history of a long
dead rat by the tail
in front of our noses,

forever believe that we
will do practically anything
to rid our eyes and nostrils
of its swinging;

their tithe for the slightest
favor to be exacted
on all our endeavors
for the rest of our lives.

Friendship freezes
in the draft of taxes.

KING-MAKER

Salesman of scepters,
you cannot tape the sizes chosen
 daily
by my head for any reason.
I own no size for capture.

If you eye one of them
out of the lapse of a minute,
you will have to wait
a year of tape into a pleated wad
of contrafactual folding.
before it reappears for my
entrapment.

You cannot stunt me.
I shrivel upon choice
into a hag-bent morsel of
 insuperable
spleen, crisped to the fit
of a hangnail on a crooked finger,

as surely my need for such
return to royalty shall runt me
into an excess of that acrid most
which is my excellence

in which I shall be frequent,
to your displeasure,
sudden upon the tiring
of your unaccountable urge
to maneuver me into a socket

of limited but indisputable circumstance according to the dictates of your strategy,

which manipulates you daily, while I sit here, bunched on a hydrant, scratching my brain.

A SPECIAL THOUGHT FOR SHREWSDAY

This poem should practice
sabotage under your fingernail,

curse
when you poke at door bells,
explode

when you type,
drum its disgruntlement
throughout the day,

then slip out

with the stealth
of its entrance,

or defy needles
and hydrogen peroxide froth,

even while the most exuberant effervescence

bubbles it all about
with buzzing
as it settles.

UNWANTED FOREIGNER

Silence may hover near,
as mendicant, its wide-mouthed
basket
readied for alms of words
of dubious value;

any will do,

or with nether extremities
tucked up into lotus, head bowed,
palms mated, forefingers
pressed to mouth and chin,

will wait for nothing
and rise,
clothed in meaning.

Silence solicits bribes
and burns them.

NOSTALGIA

The tall shade crooked
on a potted lamp
inside the long slit of a window
and the little head¹⁶
that turns and squeaks
upon the roof while signaling
the dusk and crescent moon
make me think of you
this early summer evening.

¹⁶ *Little head.* A rooftop ventilator fan.

THE MARK OF THE LEAF

The tough leaf, that once
was a knife-blade,
is now a petal.

It crumbles,
but where it sheds
its mementoes on human skin,
punctures appear.

The bare wrist
winces at the graze of leafings
from dismembered
flowers.

Any stray,
escaped from a flurry
of these, chills
in its touch, beyond leaf-bite

on a whistling morning.

BOHEMIAN PHILADELPHIA



TUNTED, ALL OF IT.

Stunted. Buildings sawed off
before their full growth
had been achieved. Short in temper.
Where else do they hurl you
to the floor of a bakery? Here,
where frustration rises,
curls over and condenses
downward into echoing streets.

You suffocate
as you gasp your way between
those two indifferent rivers
through pinched thoroughfares
and alleys where the lamp posts
prop those whose raincoats
mold precarious bodies
from heaped accumulations
of loose hardware,

when the moon smolders
with the sachet of dead cigars,

and shadows
snap back underfoot
to their sources,

where unattached and
articulated bones
deal in the architecture
of stacked drawers in
mahogany,

fretful with the old brass
clatter of handles
and mummified mistakes.

SHIFTING GEARS

The dawn had caught up with us,
long before we had planned
to dispense with the riffs,
the wine, the beer,

and after the floor
had conspired with the benches
against our bodies;

when the streets
were not yet ready for morning
excursions, being loyal still
to late-hour strays, as foolish
now in appearance
as unextinguished street lamps.

We dug our claws deep
into the snarled roughness
of the pelt of duty,

even though our eyes
hung from their sockets
at the ends
of exhausted thongs,

even though the bones
in our legs were too soft
to support
the weight and aging
of that last eight hours.

THE HOUSE THAT SHOULD BE

I would have a house
on that hill, at the top of that
great, gray tumble of moraine.

I would have a house
with a watchful spruce
beside it; some purple asters
growing at the margin of the path,
a paint-worn wheelbarrow
and a chicken coop,
its residents out
picking here and there;

and the house would be low,
gray-sided and lumpy,
its porch roof sagging somewhat
with the comfort of a shoe,
disreputable, down-at-the-heel
with years of vigorous wearing,

and in the evening
smoke would stand up
from the chimney, groping
for a slender thread of moon.

IN MEMORIAM

She was worn out,
exhausted. She had flung
her ice-axe upwards
where it caught in a ledge
when I had found her.

I told her
that the air was much too thin
up there, that the summit
was slippery. I told her
of others coming, who might
dislodge her on the way,
of those who would not
welcome an invader, as I was slipping
half-way to a better place
but nowhere near the bottom.

She said I could be
a quitter if I wished.
I told her of the great expense
of dressing for the role,
the loneliness, the friends
that she would leave behind,
and of the scarce good manners
practiced at such altitudes,
that climbing down was in no way
any easier, but that I
had found a cave for comfort.

She vanished thereupon
into a puff of cloud. I wonder
whatever became of her,
or if she remembers me.

WHITHER THE ROAD

A road swirls back into the forest;
gold beneath the headlights here
where it opens into the highway
curling forever through the gloom beyond,
where the moonlight speckles
downward through the blue of trees
going apparently nowhere,

taking escaping eyes
toward a broadening valley
rich with the patchwork of meadows:
goldenrod and Saint Michael's daisies,
the long, still mirror of a river,
two horses grazing quietly
at the entrance to a covered bridge
to what, what other distance
and whatever further woods?

DAYS OF RESURRECTION

You came back to fill in
the hole that you left in the air,
as more than a handful
of scattered feathers, a phrase
that hung from the ceiling
and the sharp presentiment
of never, which all
of us had chewed on.

And I had told you of the beauty
of the church, dismembered,
how the long years had made it
scarcely a building which stood
on earth, how the long, slim columns
sprouted tiny wings at their tops,
of the lightness of the gallery,
and how the windows arched across
the bending of sycamore branches.

Of how the pledge that had been made
had been fulfilled, but I never spoke
of the smile above the doorway,
nor of the honey-golden floor
of silk that mellowed to the sun.

BEFORE THE INTERVIEW

Instead of window blinds
these heavy drapes, fringed
along their edges
and gathered up in swags,
are almost breathing. The sconces
on the wall challenge their gold
too starkly in this room
of candles and false brocade.

My papers stacked upon
a little table with a marble top
promise no salvage
to my withered pride. I walk
on memories of spilled sugar
on the floor, conscious that my breath
might break something expensive
and original, something that its owner prizes,

and the humming deep inside my head,
as of a thousand bees, increases
to a steady roar. The scrub pine
that almost leans against the window glass
scratches it daintily. A vase,
no higher than I am, puffs smoke
from its open top, and I go
to the double doors in terror.
I twist at the stubborn knobs.
Of course, the doors are locked.

OLD GOLD

Old gold, the deep orange
in the taste of apple cider.

Old gold, the low slant
of the afternoon sun
that stains the bark of trees
and brings the breath in snatches
with the knowledge
of Autumn on the way with goldenrod.

Old gold, that shimmers
clear behind the tears of memory,
like a creek bed under water.

IN THE CAVERN OF THE CARNIVORES

A grand piano painted cream
crouches on gilded claws, its keys
outstretched as in a wide grin
of sadistic expectations.

The concert harp that stands
beside it, stands as a queen
also in gold and crowned,
a royal presence, its tall strings
quivering in ill-concealed contempt.

And I am only a battered trumpet
in a chorus of polished brass
yet barely able to release
a wretched squawk.

My feet are awkward on the carpet.
A stocking yields to the resignation
of a thread and runs, feeling
like a spider starting down my leg.

My slip peeks out and the hem
of my dress is crooked. If I
could escape down the pathway
of shallow steps to sit beside the lake
and dream! But no! A golden drop
of another hour has fallen on the rug,
and I am alone in the cavern of the carnivores.

NO MORE NO LESS THAN THIS

No more no less than this.
You are the basic nourishment
of the earth, an energy for which
no responsibility has been required of you.

I demand nothing from you
although I would steep in your presence
if I could, in my knowledge
of your aloneness, in yours of mine.

I trust you and in that
there is rest and peace. That is all
I mean (if I do not
embarrass you), when I tell you
that you are beautiful
and that I love you —
a simple statement.

AT THE TOP OF THE STAIRS



THE STAIRS swirl in descent.
Eyes watch the break to freedom
of the scuttling steps
into the pit,

and every muscle in the body
longs to follow, sailing

head first downward
on the dip of a hawk.

But you dare not even
think of it. You stiffen
for a moment at the landing,
getting your nerve up.
sensing and hearing the crunch
of splintering bone, the snap
of spine in your head.

Not now or ever
but in dream as a drift
of tissue paper, not
as with the impact of a sack
of unarticulated bone,

but a soaring
to a transitory stop,
a breath of standing
like a butterfly.

YOUR KIND OF BEAUTY

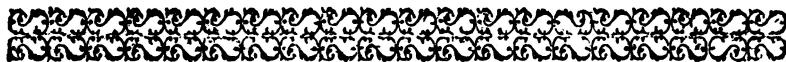
It embarrasses me
to acknowledge a cropped crag
 like you
as that one figure, towering
always out of touch and time,
yet always near enough
to constitute an invitation,

to acknowledge that leer
that others like
to think of as a smile,

as that constantly
missing promise
in the glare of a hawk
which hangs over me

like a taunt from elsewhere
and an instigator
of that inescapable gnawing
at the root of my thighs;

an abscess
under consciousness,
which frets at the edge of vision;
your kind of beauty
now.



B A D C O M P A N Y

HULDRA

She is Swedish, and one of *those*,
you know. Big. Green eyes and red hair,
all clinging velvet and ropes
of beads in the front, with cold
and cleanly chiseled features.
Real Nordic beauty
with a chalk complexion —
and no back at all.

None. All coming at you, dead ahead,
and steaming down on you,
with nothing whatsoever
to back it up. In front, solid, but hollow;
a shell of half a woman is what she is,
and I ought to know
because one evening I got behind her.

It was at this party,
you understand; the one for the author,
newly arrived (who lost the address
and never did). She must have been tired
that night, or careless. She almost
never lets it happen.
Always back to the wall.
Back to a crowd of other backs.
Back to the fireplace. Back to the upholstery
of chair or sofa. So no one ever
gets behind her to check the rumor.

But this evening
she had been standing in a corner,
trying to make the stem of a sweating
martini glass behave between the thumb
and fingers of a cotton glove,
and while concentrating

on her problem, she moved a few steps forward and outward. I immediately squeezed in behind her, and what I saw: —

Well, nothing. Or rather, *everything*: you, the tall clock ahead of me, my own red gown in the mirror. If I stared until my eyeballs heated, I could just make out the finest thread lines of a drawing on the air: head, neck, torso, and long, full skirt. I tell you, not only does she have no back, but the back of her front, as seen from behind, between her shoulders, is transparent.

THE CONSULTATION

Doctor, I must not have this child,
for it will have no bones to support it:
a poor little thing that can neither
stand nor sit nor use its hands, with a sponge
for a skull throughout a lifetime.
Can you imagine such a being as an adult?

None of this would come about
were I to drink of its father's blood,¹⁷
but I am allergic to blood
or influenced by conditioning.

Its clotting, its curdling,
its fibrinous texture estranges
my stomach; my pyloric sphincter rebels.

And is there any guarantee
that death will in any way alter
or adjust my digestive system?
Doctor, I refuse to vomit the blood
of anyone all over the landscape
and perhaps forever.

No,
I must cling to my beliefs
in the powers of garlic,
trust every weekend to its down-home
savor, and daily keep my windows
curtained against that mournful face
which entreats me nightly and politely

¹⁷ *Its father's blood.* In Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, the vampire converts a female victim into a vampire by inducing her to drink some of his blood. In Eastern European lore, a child born of a vampire and a mortal mother has no bones.

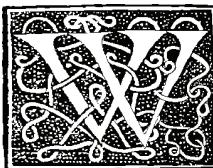
from the fire escape, and try not
to hear his fingernails squealing
in frustration against the glass.

Doctor, this child to be
has got to go.

NEXT TO NOTHING

Next to nothing, or the genuine thing,
rewards the seeking, the circuitous walk
till night hangs heavy with unborn day.
It was hardly the dragons under manhole lids
that brought you to this jumble of loose heads.
You never thought to find them here at all,
 but everyone
talked of coming here to look for them,
encouraged you to guard your socks against
 escaping flames,
to look out for fumes, and to watch for lizard eyes
squeezing slow winks from under propped-up tops.
You failed to find a single one. What did you see?
A sand-rough haze beneath your eyelids?
Your own legs brittling to the moon-death wind?
Next to nothing, or the genuine thing?

ELEGY FOR ALEXIS



HAT SORT of wind.
Alexis, covets your house?
What kind of claw slips
over balustrade and grabs
your guest, leaving the slender ledge

a vacancy of gusts that tells
the searching host no tales
of sills below, counting down
twenty stories through
the death-blue haze to asphalt
and the smash that ends all stories?¹⁸

What sort of wind,
Alexis, wept within your rooms
and wiped the stars
from all the windows
at the night-hung edge
above the senseless reeling
of the universe, that filled
all space with panic force
and swept you over,
bowled barbell brace
of door-block from its lock
on life and drove the hoofs
of stallions through your loneliness?

What sort of wind,
Alexis, breeds within the ear
that listens for you and behind
the eye, squinting up height
of wedge at fork of avenues
to the last brink of mortality
that climbs beyond the indecisive

¹⁸ *The smash that ends all stories.* A guest of the sculptor Alexis Romanovich fell to his death from the artist's studio in the Flatiron Building. The artist himself died there sometime later, purportedly from a heart-attack. The building is infamous for the cross-winds which form where Twenty-Third Street intersects with Fifth Avenue and Broadway.

glide of paper scraps
on thermals swirled past your last
floor on earth
to where you are?

What sort of wind,
Alexis, urges us to seek you
as you once had sought,
to know only the thin ledge
of the parapet where dust
is rushed in endless search
of self
where there is none.

ALWAYS ONE MORE TIME

Up the nobbled¹⁹ sides that line the well,
up each protruding stone
after the eyes have taken in
its shape and size as fit for hands
and feet to feel for looseness or security.
How slow this limb-stretch climb
that grazes skin, brings a hard hitch
to equilibrium as underneath
the half-swung weight a rock
has given more than its
endurance will allow.
At once, a new deep-rooted
hold is sought for, found and tested.

Up the hair of God,
ascent continues, all four
searches fumbling blind,
till sky intrudes
to judge each new configuration
a starveling second,
before the lid comes down.

¹⁹ *Nobbled*. Rough-hewn quarried stone.

BAD COMPANY

If a thick green discharge
oozes from underneath his fingernails,
and stains the carpet,
or if the teeth in his smile
gleam solidly with stainless steel,
a bad evening is probably
ahead of you,
if not a frightful one.

If she brings in a dazzle
of chandelier lusters and a stiletto laugh;
if her heels strike sparks
from the parquetry and her hair
retracts visibly into her scalp,
meditate, if you can,
upon an inexpensive lawyer
and fire insurance.

If the two of them
arrive together as a team and vanish
upon the moment of appearance,
scrutinize the fireplace,
then, if any sort of ankles and shoes
whatever hang into it
from the chimney,
saturate the whole house
with the stench of cabbage, even
if simulated, and take your leave.

Close the door smartly,
hang some bacon from the knob,
and run like hell.

MOON DRINKER

You soaked up more than your fill
of the moon

last night
when I saw you
on the front step
offering the moon the full of your face
and turning it
this way and that
for saturation.

I could see how the day to come
would know you,
pale,
as you always are
at the breakfast table,

but in that shuttered room
of yours,
your face would mask itself
closely in a delicate
radiance,

strengthening
with any slightest contact,

as between my palms,
burning
in memory later.

THE CALL OF THE TINKLING CYMBALS

They are here again today.
Their fingertips are alive
with buttercup bells. Patterns,
cut out of the sunlight,
play over the flowers that dance
in the winking of their hands.
Hear them. Already the air
is rain-waiting,
pausing upon its patience
until the end of the celebration,
through which, the children,
peering above the sills
of their eyes, are asking
if I am harmful.

Is it not foolish of them
when their chants cling to the corners
of my darkness after their dance
is done? My rooms are still
and weighted, thick with the heather
on the breath of the gods,
and all night long
with the invitation
of the fire in the bells.
These are my kinfolk,
who counsel me in the singing
of unknown birds.

EAST HILL IN A SUMMER RAIN

A night-black toad
with a spot of crimson
on the top of its head
sat puffing on the steps
of the veranda.

No one else noticed it.
They all spoke softly
of the flooding in the cellar.

I gave the beast a respectful glance,
but it would not budge;
its reality remained unbroken.
All is not lost
if such creatures still exist,
as does that one.

An emaciated maiden
in a long white gown
wrings her nearly transparent
hands in the rain
by the roadside
and peers through
her long, lank hair.

I shall mention,
in passing, the smoke
from the witches' cauldrons
that rises from holes
in the woods,
(you can see it
any early morning)

but the unicorn
which dances on the tops
of the mountains
will have to be
numbered among the several
other omens that lurk there,
awaiting human circumspection.

ON HOVING'S HILL

Ghosts and their counterfeits
on Hoving's Hill
are met as equals. I shall be difficult
to find if you should search
for me among them,
for I am solid;
I take up space and may not bring
my bulk of blood and bone
in stride across the fence,
but still I wander there
and prod at them,
testing for skin and hair
for rind of wind and sun-games
shot with shadows
finding out which ones
ascended Hoving's Hill²⁰ and fell
in Heckscher's pit²¹
just as the sun went down,

how many
and which ones of them
are likely to return,
if anyone, once more
supported by that sand-dump mound
remembers how it was
and when,

²⁰ *Hoving's Hill*. A dirt-pile in Tompkins Square on the Lower East Side was called Hoving's Hill, and was the site of Hare Krishna cult events attended by poets including Holland and Allen Ginsberg. Thomas Hoving was appointed Parks Commissioner in 1965. The park became the site of social unrest during the 1970s when music concerts took place there, and riotous confrontations between hippies, police, Puerto Rican youths, and local Ukrainian immigrants.

²¹ *Heckscher's pit*. Hoving's successor as Park Commissioner was August Heckscher, who dug up parts of Central Park for almost two decades. I could find no accounts of construction in Tompkins Square, but this poem suggests that Heckscher levelled Hoving's Hill.

how long he stayed
and whether ghosts in guise
of men drop all pretense
in Hecksher's husk
of an inverted mound, itself
the ghost of Hoving's Hill
turned upside down.

ST. MARK'S CHURCH IN THE BOUWERIE: OFFERTORIUM



REMEMBER IT ALL quite clearly:
the pelting feet, the half-shouldered
overcoats, the near brutality
with which some
two dozen persons including two
vestrymen
stumbled and tramped over
seated parishioners

to reach the aisle, of how it opened
to their record dash, how they blocked
the front door in terror and would not move,
when in the church behind them
there was nothing.

Dust. Sunlight. The old smoke
of a sermon rising above the heads
that were filled with the aroma
of a Sunday roast, while the oven gauge
crept cautiously upon its deadline
and awoke them to a motion
at the far side of the altar,

which after a moment of definition
brought them to their feet
faster than the first bar of a hymn
and launched them into a panic-pounding race
down aisle, through door, into the ugliness
of street outside, ugly enough to reassure them.

I saw her at the Epistle side
of the altar, an exclamation mark
of a slender girl, the bulky bell
of a crinoline blossoming from her waist.
One chalk blotch of a hand at her breast
to secure the long triangular shawl,

the neatly-bonneted head and two nailhead
eyes that seemed to bore into it
or into the bone behind it,
swaying as on a light breeze
that changed position with the slightest
stirring of the air, poised a good
half-foot above the floor with sunlight
creeping between the hem of her skirt
and the tired carpeting, wavering
in a paroxysm of nonfocus, rippling
violently from head to foot
as all the details turned to haze,
cleared back, smudged fuzzy,
fixed their focus once again
as through binoculars and suddenly
wisped off, went all to pieces in a scattering
of blurs which swiftly disappeared.

And that was all,
absolutely all! The church lay still,
fumbling about with its budget
which would not repair the rectory,
candles to be lit that they might
be seen by all men. I saw hers,
guttering, nearly transparent
against the stale sunlight, flickering,
wobbling like the candle flame
upon the altar, still here as then.
When? 1860, before the candlestick was broken.

RIDE UP THE WIND

Still heard, still flute-song flying
on the sea-wing, still aloft,
do not glide further downward, do not come
closer to sand and rock than you are now.
You have already come too close.
I hear your feet that once picked rain-stop
pinpoints on a pond, on flat of sole, walk
as the rest of us, tamping the earth beneath you.
Since the herd has hemmed you in, required of you
a pace as footwork-weighted as its own,
you are as one in sodden finery, your hair
bedraggled, as all who are afraid of self
see themselves mirrored. Would you humor them
by feigning poverty as no one thinks he does,
as everyone feels that his fellows must?
Ride up the wind,
as one who skimmed the breakers of the plumage,
stiffened hair with sea-spout water brilliants,
made the vast dance of the after-gale
 your chariot, ascend
with all in arc-sweep upward who follow
and understand.

A REPETITION OF THREE

These, the approaching three on all these streets
come, and are come upon, once more advancing, come
on a never-mind loose lilt of limb, are gone
to come once more, three plaster masks
 against your going,
come from whichever place towards which
 your going leads.
come as if marching on your origins.
At gasp of knife unsheathed, at altercation
sprouting a scattering of heads at window sills,
at black of body down at flash of fists,
 in crowd-throb nucleus
crushed against the entering lurch of anyone,
a flashlight bleaches them to focus from the others
as words made flesh at blood-shock
on the sword-breath thrust,
words flesh-clasped instantly on thunderclap,
 and coming,
come on the gray of waiting. From stunned sense
at birth of violence, they come reborn.

PROTEST FROM A SINGULAR PROFESSION



HOUGH ONLY a common house-ghost,
skilled to pass through brick
and concrete
much as cold comes unrestrained
by voile, through no acquired
technique,
but as a function of me
which repeats itself with me as message
I must fault this skill
as action independent of control.
It sifts me down
to concentrate of dust and light
on which I draw for substance
in a single stroke of smoke
self-sculptured to existence
in a humanoid advance on space and time,
shaft smitten through to both
of them and rupturing both utterly
in service of that eye which otherwise
lives bounded by its blindness and all
without my authorship or questioning.
Intent is sight of me,
speaks of itself instantly
when I appear, calls out
in illustration of its argument
which is my pose, the purpose
of my gestures and my full
attire styled into focus of address
which often goes mistaken.

Time and again the contact cracks
across the centuries
and misses;

time and more time
for shock alone, an empty house
of unintended secrecy as what
went by unspoken

keeps on
speaking still in waste
of spatial rhetoric
in vacant rooms.

A POET DECLAIMS IN A GRAVEYARD

Clouds congregate
and shadow blots the stone book,
laid open on its fluted lectern,
that the wind might skin the names
from its pages of marble,
and repeat them with endless sobbing.

Your papers rebel against
their anchoring pebbles. Your hands
press them down at their edges,
grinding them into grooves
of disregarded names in support
of your thrust of passion,

as your throat throbs
with remembered loves, the aftertaste
of werewolf revels,²²
and the leap of dolphins.

The deep grass shudders
to the roots as the vanguard rain
chatters on splitting slate.

²² *Werewolf revels*. This poem is about Jack Veasey, the Philadelphia-born poet who first came to New York in 1975. A werewolf poem was the centerpiece of his first chapbook, published by The Poet's Press that year.

ORIENT MOON

There is a rabbit in the moon,
a fetal rabbit, closely cramped
against its curving rim,

his shoulders hunched
about his head from which the long ears
flow down rounded back;
a neatly-packed white rabbit
with a mixing bowl in foreleg
hug that holds a month of salad.

Smudged eyes no longer brood
above us. The rabbit profile
looks beyond the earth, his eyes
half-closed in contemplation.

Now the honey drains no longer
into dreams and sickens them,
but the inverted salad bowl,
plastered with lettuce leaves
hangs over us. Our madness seeks
no sweetness from the night.
Our ease wizens with vinegar.

This is a rabbit-ridden
Orient moon, which has no need of us.

SCHERZO AT LAVALETTE BEACH

After those centuries of practice,
after those long rehearsals
at the far end of the beach
where the wind so often wove your hair
with sunset laced with cirrus,

why have you come here
far too drunk to keep four legs
beneath you and in good shape
for support?

Look at you now!
There they go, spraddled to ungainly
four-sag stance of a calf
too young to know its balance.
With your stag's hindquarters
and elegant knees, your human torso
raised as figurehead above your lithe
potential for sylvan grace,

you dare to slump there
over your auto-harp, your legs
all out of tune and your hair
sweated to slime of a rotten dock
at the moss-edge under water.

You are a poor show
for a local monster. After the town
had paid you off in gin
for dooryard dances, you drowned
Killarney in a sodden croak,
and when you could have sung
in pine-croon the incantation
of the seven seas you had to plunge
your hind legs into the tulip bed,

whence vomiting the Pleiades,
you left their ghostly star-tears
on the seedling lawns.

Go tear the beach apart
and come back sober.

THE BUDDHA IN MILKY QUARTZ

Infusible,
insoluble within the haze,
thickened about
the question of Nirvana.

In trigonal,
trapezohedral chamber cracked
to snarls of veins,
within the steam-skeined
cloud of skin,

the ever-soul

lives, *mudra*²³ of silence
and solidity
in quartz-crazed stupa.²⁴

Carbon dioxide
and *samsara*²⁵ crowd the highway
of the inner eye
that ends all roads.

²³ *Mudra*. A movement or pose in the practice of Yoga.

²⁴ *Stupa*. A Buddhist monument.

²⁵ *Samsara*. In Hindu religion, the endless cycle of death and rebirth.

FAMILIAR CREATURES

I know that someone unseen
shared that house
with me

who circled the table
in darkness of thought

around and about
all night,

whose typing
came in gusts from the bathroom,

who played organ
at night in the grove
outside my window.

None of this
had anything to do at all
with the tall figures
with the heads of animals

drifting in procession
outside on the curving gravel
of the driveway

with the strength of the moon.

ARACHNE

Very well, then.
You have decided to forego
your civilized appearance
for the moment and to go about
in your costume for the other role
you play for your entertainment.

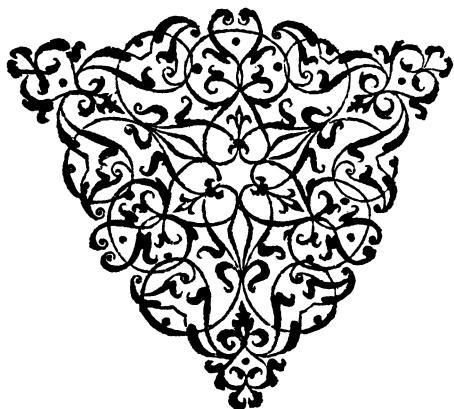
You settle over there
in the corner and crouch
on your eight hairy legs
with all your knees bent
up higher than your head
which is like a fluffy ball
on an elaborate stool.

Only now
you are getting older
and a good bit fatter
and your hair has gone
grayer than before,
but you are content
to sit like that
and to look at me.

Years ago, you
would have terrified me
by doing no more than that,
but I care little now.

I see you these days
with all your knees bent tight
against your underside
which is turned up
like an ugly little flower

or the fist of one frustrated,
and I know now
that that is exactly
what you are, Black Widow.
If only you could thus
be seen by others!





OUT OF AVERNUS

MEDUSA

Spray. Thick and heavy dawn. A day
clouded, sucked, swirled, exploded, pouring back
into the sea. The hiss of serpents rising from my head
as mist in streamers writhing across this rock.
The night with horrors rising on the wind,
flung by the breakers at my feet, their jaws gnashing.
Tentacles half-hidden in the beards of weed
hanging above the down-pulled anger,
the recoil, and massing force.

Even these golden wings and iron talons
are little help against the full attack
constantly made, withdrawn, and reasserted
against this rotting molar in the sea.

Mercy spares you, turns you to stone,
that you may not see me, see [how] beauty in a face
mortal and more than human calls forth no love;
[how] any love of mine is walled around
 in igneous hardness,
or torn from me, blown in shreds of icy spume.

²⁶ *Hesperides*. The distant location, far in the West, where dwelt the nymphs of the evening, in a garden of golden apples.

Kill me. Life waters at the eyes.
 Swing back your sword.
Look elsewhere, lest your arm remain
 upraised forever.
I must resign myself, in death,
 to a singular condition,
to darker places, caves loathsome, crawling
with sluggish saurians, cold in the deep recesses
of the cess-pits of the gods.

THE LAST PLANTAGENET

This night the third King Richard tips his nails
with wink of homicide, assumes the claws
that turn the prods of fingers into bayonets,
and drops them in his haste. He crouches, pokes,
crawls close enough to rough of wood in search
for flesh-rip steel. His throne glows red-gel sodden
with the seep of blood from ancient tragedies.

A shadow sprouts
in maim-spit highlight and the fallen king
reaches into darkness for the prong of greed.
I watch, but do not drop to seek the blink of death.
I keep bad company by accident.

BLACK SABBATH

*Thou shalt not suffer
a witch to live.
Thou shalt not suffer a witch,
or witches are dangerous
merely in their existence.
Four hundred years ago
you burned us at the stake.
Now in this steel-
stitched century, you freeze us.*

How often have I been aware
of you; your comings
and your goings to that great bare rock,
but until the night
when I saw the pack
of you, a vine-snarl
of writhing limbs
and naked bodies,
coiling about one another,
slithering over one another in the
grey-wet light of Candle Mass,

until I saw some of you,
beard-clogged with wine,
bloated with overeating,
greasy mouthed, foul fingered,
until I saw you drinking
the reeking blood of a baby
who was born by accident,
until I saw you stumbling
and fawning before that goat-headed
one, to whom you pledged me
on pain of strangulation,

I had not summed up fully
the implications of the whispers
in my hair that made sleep
a horror for me, when whining,
creeping voices, like tiny hands,
clutched at my fear
receptors, saying that I knew
that in my loneliness
the silences carried your footfalls
on ridgepoles, on spruce treetops,
that I had seen the rush
of brooms blow wide
the mottled dust-mice from the sky.

I swear I did not see them,
but on clear, still nights
a sudden wind would blow my candle
out, and send a rattling skeleton
of chalk cold bones
down my cringing spine,
harp fingering bones,
plucking a fleshless music
from my vertebrae.

It was *you*,
not I, who set me here.
It was you who stripped me and stretched
me supine as priestess-victim for the
hollow Black-Mass throng,
and it was you
who gave me in marriage
to the Black Master,
setting the death-white wedding ring
upon my finger, peeling a circlet
of skin from it
at knuckle top,

and it was one of you,
who administered those vows
which I must not remember.

And now I am here,
in dark of woods, an exile
mid juniper and fern,
living on lambs' tails
and huckleberries,
stewing reindeer moss
and ginseng,
cowering in caves,
walled in by fallen trees,
quick-felled by lightning,
guarded by gouts
of mud against the wind,
setting a watch
against snake and spider,
a dispenser of potions,
of herbs, narcotics,
of the unchanging lore
set down in the books I read
once in the winter
firelight of my cottage.

Now rings and amulets
send through my nerves impulses
from their owners'
personalities, as on the surfaces
of rain barrels and ponds,
I see the faces of the dead.
The tornado-voiced pine tree
roars through my understanding
and fills out words of portent,
of prophecy, of hidden knowledge.

And for my tithe,
I give my core to cold,
as my raw-boned Master holds me,
filling me length-full
of marrow snow, here on this high,
treeless, earth-bare
altar to moon-scoured emptiness,

I am the offering
to the denial of love,
world old, my flesh age cast away
for the joy of a ring dance,
(forbidden) which beat
in the fire that used to bring
goblins to the walls
of my cottage.
I grow hard and wind-bitten.

If I extend my hand,
fear grasps the fingers
of him who takes it. Terror
trips the feet that enter
my door, and my hunger for warmth
is a fist clenched upon fright
at the pit of my brain.
I reach out
and my hand snaps
at rain-lash, holds nothing
is wet and is clean.

Here
on this height with this book
and the type
which goes blank as my eyes
run from each word to each line,
which erases itself
as each page is leafed over,

with this deluge of light,
hot on my shoulders,
in front of those eyes
out in that void,
before this microphone,
as ever when I was casting
spells to the crows,
as ever when I was cooking
tripe on the hearth
I am removed
from the world-rush, an exile
in floodlight,
at lectern
alone in my voice,
alone on the stage
alone in this cupful of space
and time, naked
to thought and unspoken phrase,
unprotected from wish-forms
and still alone.

*Thou shalt not suffer
a witch to live.
Thou shalt not suffer a witch,
for witches are dangerous
merely in their existence.
Four hundred years ago
you burned us at the stake.
Now in this steel-
stitched century, you freeze us.*

THE ARGO



AY AFTER DAY we waited
upon her answers. She, who preceded us,
walked brazen over pinnacles
and ridges of seas,
skipped over hollows, rode the sleek
monster backs of the endless waves

into the gaping crevasses between the stars
whence she had come to us.

We had known her
first as a stranger in the sorrel-soft
puncture of August and September,
spear slanted down
in a tumult of bellowing leaves,
leaving no trace of her coming,
of her passageway
through an ecstasy of indigo,
but hairs torn from her crest
and floating high overhead,
cirrus in Virgo.

But could we expect
serious instruction from the trunk
of a tree that had woven a galaxy
of suggestions in wind and sun,
in a tide-flow of racing
letters on moss and stone,
even though we had stripped it
of boughs and had hacked
away all but her figure?

How could we be so sure?
She had governed that tree.
Her hands had played in the branches.
Her thoughts had given voice
to the winds which had roared
it to words. She had whispered the leaves
into a scuttle of messages.
We had tried to confine her,

naked in the bark-bare wood,
yet had we found her?
Now her crest scored the sky.
From her helmet portents sprang
for in an urgency of portent.
Upon her breast, snake-sprawled
and leering, the demented face of Medusa,
defiant, peered out from the hide
of a lion. I do not doubt
that all of us had reservations,
questioned, condemned as criminal
foolishness much that she told us,
that all of us, under our skulls,
were as grey-eyed as she,
and that all our lives
would be lost in the ship and our plans,
however logical, if we ignored
what she told us.
She was lunatic,
storm-proud, a warrior. Three roads
lay open to her equine impulses.
Past, present, and future
floated upon her shield: as one,
as three superimposed,
a trinity of troubling deliberations;
clear in their separate entities,
confused in their overlap
and triple-deep texture,
merging and swimming
apart. They were not to be looked
upon or endured.

Day after day, our ears
were hollow cones to funnel
her counsels into our heads, our ears,
the rocking speech of the shaft
against thole pin. Her lips
were distant, high as her head was,
floating above the spray,
each splatter of which
was a blister to ignorance.

In Virgo we found the figureheads
of ourselves, hewn from our trees
of bones, touseled in the scrawl
of our nerves and veins.

At sun-focus, Virgo;
riding the arrogant storms
of our search: *Pallas Athena*,
crouched in the tunneled coiled
tombs of our heads.

Listen!
Attend Sophia!

THE SYBIL OF CUMAE

Out of Avernus, up from beneath
the overhanging rock and shifting
of intensity of darkness, I became
manifest in climax of joined brasses
and bowed strings, declared myself
in trumpet salutation, in carved
and weathered wood, yet had not turned
to face the open portal of my genesis.

This was my hour to pray,
as music, concentrated in my head
behind the ivory of brow, the gate of horn
too bright to burn as sound shot
upward in a beckoning of Pentecostal flame
and wept its fire behind me,
then flickered its hunger from my shoulder,
died, and in its death, diluted darkness.

I was suspended, carnal, and yet flesh,
light given form by creep of shade
as from the march of clouds, of pits
and of depressions upon the marble hold,
hand on my forward thrust of vision.
Brightness died and softened the desert
of my body and I, alive, remained
an artifact and out of Time.

Hear me! I speak in smoke;
a web of spray obscures my meaning,
moistens its brittle thorns
and globes them with the eyes of angels.
Come upon my presence suddenly
to feel a sword and breathe away
and leave you petrified, as I, an illusion
of the deft deceit of portraiture.
I bare you before the bold eye of the future.

Look and go blind. Hell lingers
in a dust drift when the eyes
are born again to morning, and retreat
within the remnants of receding sleep
to find once more the promises
molded out of fog. Whether in truth
of ivory or through hallucined horn
the blast becomes your image,
look on mine, high on the long note
sounded over Hell, the golden leaves
break brains and wake the dead.

COFFEE HOUSE POET

Now I have seen her,
who had always been for me
a creature swirled from wave waste by the wind and rushed
across the ocean crust,
her hair, a cloud that carried
stars that its haste uprooted
and which clung to it like burrs.

Now she is all of this, and something more,
something that echoed to my cloudy cross,
beaded with sweat of God in evening amethyst
which mingled with the twilight and inflamed the world;
her world of crowd and noise, my world of agate drift
and stains that spotted sundry pages from which
I dislodged her,
long before I sought her out, before her hair
wept bitter stings of ice upon a butt-squashed floor,
discarded star-sprouts swept away to grow
in cracks that gape to cloud rifts
where the floor had been.

PORTRAIT OF LAZARUS



THROUGH milk-thick waters across your face
stare at me, if you can. Although your
eyelids weigh
the cumulative poundage of the years
clustered upon your passing,
look at me, and in the strengthening
of your gaze

break through the wasting web of cloud
between your plane and mine.
Concentrated in the focus of your eyes
grasp what your attention lights upon
and merge with its reality.
In one long look come back.

I have no skill to rouse you, have not dared
to stir the fleece of sleep that almost shrouds
unquestioned structure, hesitate to mar
the structure under which you float,
lest I should lose you with your image.

Currents strive with tides
yet you are motionless beneath them,
sway, widen, shrink, distort and yet
in composition hang inviolate
beyond the outer boundaries of life.
I could touch you into fragments
with a whisper.

Scream!

Like one who serves himself
as Orpheus and binds the muscles
hauling the hawser till a span of time
is coiled upon one death
and stings with sound the immobility
of vacuum, then in crescendo
ruptures his wrongful grave and climbs
his brass-wind guide rope back to life,

ascend the sun stave to the surface,
press hard against the clouds
until their first threads disperse
and wait before your mid-day will
then turn the false integument of death
to thinning night.

I see you soaked,
Death's moisture on your face,
your eyes still hooded against light.
Until they cease to mirror
the contents of your recent world,
be sure to hide them.

Until the waters of the Styx
no longer cling lo ends of hair
nor wait to drop in fall of globules
to the living soil, I wait,

fearful lest they should fall
in chains of poison to my skin,
dreading the wisdom of the dead
which holds your eyes.

THROUGH SNOW, UNDER BLACKENED MOON

The night when the tired moon
shriveled and turned black, the sky
was cracked to spiders' legs
of fracture on the boughs
on which the snow-cloud mattresses
lay heavy. Air was dense
with the snow and trunks
were packed to half-height in it.

Our candles broke their fragile thorns
against its charging bulk
and left us floundering.

This was no night for pilgrimage,
for single-file wound in and out
among the starved trees, for following
what little we knew of what little road
years of neglect had left us, for our search,
now a dried husk of compulsion.

Long ago the joy within
was whipped by wind and beaten
into wicks too damp to soak up fire,
and smoke was all we walked upon.

Yet still we moved,
conscious of the black orb
hanging low above our heads
looming near enough to shove us
in the ground and high enough
to threaten the sudden drop
of a whole world, mashing arbutus
and our bodies underneath
a meteoric corpse

watched by the saints
who long had prayed for it
and wrapped its darkness of retirement
in their luminescence.

Friars, thieves, and the gypsies
seek the outline of their future
in its sheen and cannot tell
its meaning, can discern no markings.

Saints know the original enlightenment
towards which we drive ourselves
through wind and snow,
through what is left of trees
while the moon shrinks
and drains off virtue.

Only the saints have found
the old route under snow.
Their candles stretch proud fingers,
claw-bright against the slash
of storm, and touching
as ours did not, a truth
of snow-clogged stars we cannot know.

THE HYMN OF THE ROCKS



ULLED BY presbyopia and childish prank
he walked along the tide-line
where assembled monks were said
to crouch,
cowled out of human form,
a multitude of motionless and
rounded backs.

The winds came down and harsh to flesh.
No garment stirred. No hands came up between
expectant face and grate of air.
No shift of weight altered the position
of limbs pressed against arteries,
freezing under heft of granules, granite legs,

and yet his words swept over them
and carved-out arms clasped about heads
on upraised knees, smoothed over hard
under lichen-crusted case of stone.
Weed wept down pitted jaws in beards
salt-caked in penance. Terns rode
out icy skies of versicles,
and then his speech was over.

Silence. The sea was slab.
Adrift on wings, whiteness slid
over blue and climbed to wait for all
the beach to hummock up to life,
and shout.

The child guide slid
inside the door, shameful, as his master
felt out forms of rock
where all his audience was said to be.

The old man bowed, signed himself
and all assembled there, as one, to God,
turning himself away to drag himself
on staff to storm-chewed steps
and then, "*Hail, Holy Bede!*"

Unlocking from compact form
from over hunching years, stooped
from the crippling of millennia, the rocks
swayed upward, loosing clasp
on clench of secrets crammed in the crouch-pack
grasp of bodies, letting out
their hoarded senescence. All fissures spread
as up through the strength of crags
the bass notes crannied wide
as gullies of vibration shuddered
underground and all the seabirds,
flashing to the risen sun,
unsealed their hush of premonition,
scrawl squealed through song of rock
down-dropped by undertow
to rumble underneath the ocean,

*"Hail, Holy Bede!"*²⁷

²⁷ This poem is based on the tale of St. Bede and the Singing Stones, from *The Golden Legend* of Jacobus de Voragine, 1275 CE.

MELUSINE DISCOVERED

They said my eyes were different:
wider, deeper, darker, bluer.

That is all.

So what do you say
when the whole garrison
bluders into the bath,
and sees you

like that;
your top half huddled
under your hair, and all else
from the waist down
coiled fat and sleek in rolls
of spots and mottlings
in a pail?

Nothing,
but your eyes swim in a season
of dances, lost with all
such seasons forever; lovemaking
after the fashion of woman;
a man —

*Keep her in her place, he said,
pickled in brine.*

A fine kettle
of snake-flesh for a princess!

Meanwhile, you wring
your spine to pick loose
absurd packets of leather
and cartilage, then flap them open
in his face.

That for you, nosy!

Look me up in the crotch-hold
of the tallest pine.
I shall be up there,
swinging spots and mottlings
from a bough in the starlight,
and mind your careless huntsmen
keep their arrows by them,

Uxoricide!

MELUSINE, OUR SISTER

*after the Twelfth-Century French legend
of her whom The Book of Demons cites
as reputed ancestress of the Holy Roman
Emperor Henry VII.*

Lashed by your hair
to the twigs in the highest branches
of your tree,

and boughs below,
by the currents of fluid
rhythms in your ophidian extension,
molded into grasp by habit,

you keep your exile.

Your wings, long in disuse,
hang idle, like sections of loose bark,
like an old door in need
of a lock for efficient closing,

but your face starts from the foliage
when the wind rises,
breaking the green with brittle
whiteness and enormous eyes,

in which towers, falcons and mercenaries,
still in action,
draw on that extra darkness,
that richer blue,
numbed changeless by betrayal
and rejection, and finally,
upon escape,

again by disillusionment
with the tyranny of liberation.

EURYDICE

He was never completely
convinced of my presence. He felt
that the minute he turned
his eyes from me I might vanish
as once, in fact, I did;

that a lover crouched always
under a toadstool, ready
to seize me by the ankle
and, gripping it, would yank me
underground, as if the surfaces
I trod with him were water,

or that another might be hanging
from a bough by his knees,
fishing about with both hands
in the dusk below
for my hands, reaching.

There was one
in the closet under the stairs,
one in the laundry hamper,
and one who sang madrigals
in the smokehouse every evening.
What an ear he had!

When he came down to Hades, singing,
What shall I do without Eurydice,
I all but answered him in song:
as did you always
with Eurydice.

He turned back to look at no one,
and I laughed.

THE APPLES OF SODOM AND GOMORRAH

I have her name,
here in my fist, to riddle
with my nails.
I have her hair,
which I extracted from the teeth
of a comb I stole.
I have her footsteps,
embodied in mud, which I shook
from her shoes one day.
I have the parings
of her nails, which I swept
from her bedroom floor.
I was her houseguest
and ate my food unsalted,
that my efficiency
might not be impaired.

Now I shall take all her identity,
rolled in a bit of rag,
and I will make her a tree
like those that gasped salts
from the soil of Sodom and Gomorrah,
for their fruit are leather bladders,
vesicles that have no core,
no substance and no seed,
that loose a puff of dust when once
you break their casings open.
Such shall she be; so shall she bear.

Her fruit will fall and drop from her,
wind in a husk of rind. Her children
shall be born perfect, but two
weeks after birth each one
shall die strangled before the sun
rises upon her arid acres.
Her children are not hers.

They are mine, as he is, and always
shall be mine. Therefore
her children have been usurped
I should have borne them,
but his seed has been misplaced.
Thus I shall take from her
that which was never hers.

The Autumn of my anger
closes in, scorching the edges
of the meadow, calling
a yellow challenge
from the heart of a stand
of hemlock, and I would
throttle her, driving my drift
of clouds into her windpipe.
I would send flights
of arrow-headed geese into her gullet.
She shall have no success.
One by one the offspring
he has sired shall fall curled,
brown and brittle on the grass.

But as for me, I shall be delivered
of a *diabolus*, for now a maple
blaze exfoliates within my womb.
Acorns of hatred spatter
from my eyes upon her roof top,
making the sounds of half-crazed footfalls
of horned and shriveled imps.
They will not let her sleep.
Their lidless eyes will watch her,
lying beside my lover, pressed
into a cast iron stupor,
will watch my arms elongate
through the window until my hands
have touched her baby's throat.

Three have already
been extinguished. One more
means nothing. Since these
four are not mine,
they have no right to be.

They will tell her to be prepared,
to hold a silver knife
in readiness, to slash at my wrist,
to search the markets daily
for a woman with a bandaged arm,
but my blood does not flow
when I command it to hold back.
My arms shall be bare and whole.
She will not find me.

But I shall come again upon her next
delivery. My shadow arms and hands
will flow through keyholes.
I have her name, a handful
of mouse-brown hair, her toenail clippings,
even a loosened, spewed out filling.
I am a scavenger
with a special use for gold.

RECOLLECTIONS OF A MEMORABLE MAN

He is the horseman
standing
at the turnpike cutoff
horse motionless
yet twitching.

He himself
in overworked denims
and tee shirt
barrel-hooped all the way
up the torso
in navy blue.

His vision is on vacation
window shopping.
his hair
emeritus
has retreated
to a suburb above the ears.

He is out of place,
but nowhere as much as his master
with the halberd profile
whom we remember
drilling both elbows
into spurious marble
in a grease-choked diner
with both eyes plugged
into the reruns flickering
across the beige
and oil in the reinforced concrete
of a coffee cup,
while his Fruehauf rig
lay by near the gas pumps
dreaming of San Francisco
and its City Lights.

EARLY ON CHRISTMAS MORNING

Dawn leaves some timorous
fingers lying on the splintering floor.
The shack has shaken off the pains of night.
Rising, the sunbeams prod
at Joseph's puzzled face, breed thoughts
of seeking out some new-baked bread
and a cup of fresh spring water.

Light strengthens the smile
on the sleeping face of Mary,
fans out in triumph across the walls
and sparks within Joseph's brain
some private considerations:

How can that Child be mine in fact,
and still be the promised Messiah;
that tiniest beginning of a human being
with the face of a Hierophant?
Come on, let us do the best we can
with this thoroughly perplexing morning.

EMILY DICKINSON

She wrote her letters
to the world, which received
without response; her portrait
on a postage stamp
was issued much too late.

proclaiming her a poetess
in answer from a world
that knew no better

than to praise her
with faint damnation
through the sluggishness
of first-class mail.

MARTHA

to Martha Graham

Clean-limbed and carved
clear down to bone,
she stove the zenith through
with tempered steel,

her cold face hardened
by the moon,
her black hair
flying.

She whirled the blackness
of the night around her.
The muscles of her belly
drew both in and down.

She learned from them
the patterns of her hunger,
became the burning goddess
who controlled their power
and threw upon its labors
till she drove
that dark beast to its death.

The stony passion
of her mission strove
above all life lend her legend.

The shriek of God
compacted in her sinews.
Her God alone.

MARY DANCING: A STATUE

She, whose cape
serves as a lodging
for obstreperous winds.

whose hair provides
the caverns for the nestling
of small bright stars,

whose head is the dancing
area for the leaping of planets,
whose hands clutch in panic
at the spread of the Milky Way,

whose farm girl's torso
flexes its muscles in her dancing,
whose small foot kicks impatiently
at the interfering serpent
which competes for position
on the bite of the crescent moon.

Can this be she, whom last
I saw demurely standing
in a circular puddle of flowers,
her draped head inclined
as for listening and her hands
joined loosely in supplication,
quite unaware of the ooze
of grace down the folds
of her marble garments?

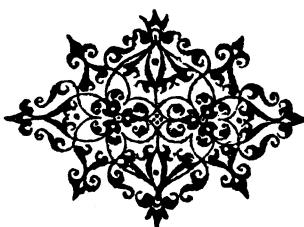
Can this determined dancer
in the heart of a cosmic storm
be truly the Blessed Mother
of Our Savior?
She can, she is.
She shall be. Ever.

THE WITCH AGES

Cast out your dead years.
Once more this month among
these rocks after your bowl of clay
is emptied of the inky water
and the bone of the new moon
drifting upon that darkness
has been drained.

Your youth will spend
its wetness upon your lips
and age will ring out
all its ruin gladly
when the bowl is broken.

Then blue will speak
its secrets through the blackness
of your hair, mixing new
streaks of gray throughout
your twinned and stalwart braids
that drip cold water off
their ends upon the thirsting ground.





Y O U C O U L D D I E
L A U G H I N G

BREAKING DOWN THE NIGHT

When you are used
to nights that are filled
with flutterings and tweakings,

what do you do
when you meet one which says
absolutely nothing
and presides stone-faced and obstinate?

What do you say
to the darkness when its speaking
has removed itself to most
uncertain places or listens
at the thin screen
of consciousness, waiting
for you to talk?

Will you oblige it
with a volley
of vituperation aimed at nothing
in this world, or will you
also wait, if only
just to see which one
of you can wait
the longest?

FROM AN OPEN WINDOW

Throughout the day the sun
continued with its aureate drone,
let down its screens of gauze
between the passacaglias²⁸
of the branches, and played
through the nearly imperceptible
comings and goings of meandering
moats among them. It leaned
on the tallest trees and flattened
the exuberance of the meadow,

It would have continued,
had not its tone
been insolently broken
by a more aggressive splendor,

like the upstart suddenness
with which
 first one,
another,
and a third of four
inordinately tall and slender crosses
blared trumpet challenges
above a summit of foliage,
each with a clear discoid
heart of glass gaping
from the intersection of its members
as if in astonishment
before a monstrous truth,

²⁸ *Passacaglia*. A Baroque musical form, a set of variations in which a short theme or ground is repeated in various voices in each variation, although completely new melodic material may be played over it.

or like the imposition
of cadences by Richard Strauss
from an open window;
attendant also
upon the wonder,
but without surprise.

PHOTOGRAPH OF A REFLECTION

after a photograph by Donald Curran

Nascent in glass
a face encompasses
the painted forms beneath it,
floats within
the ribbon width of smoke,
is kept aloft
upon a spire of flame.

Hypnosis
in updraught
rising in awareness
closes in
and coifs hard against jaw
and brown a harried want
escaped from sensuality
to thrill
only in chilling cheek
of glass. and wears
the face of prayer to keep its torment closeted.

The night is tall,
the fingered light extends
a warning to the compline mask
that disciplines desire.

With only force of mind
that burns away emotion
the spirit that ascends the cylinder
of smoke from pane of glass
can only drift
back to the gelid surface
and remain
later as film of dampness
which the hungry sun
shall eat away.

RETURN THIS NOTE REWRITTEN

Does the writing come up
to the surface of the paper

if held above
the flame of a candle?

or does it explode?

Look, friend,

even if this whiteness
chokes on letters;

kicks,
bites and scratches,

squirms in its seethe
in so little space,

it is blank,

as blank as the nonstop
voices on the radio
next door.

MAD SONG

When birds have hoofs
and fishes have feathers,
I might believe you
when you scoff at stars
that agitate the bone
behind your brow
even though a flock of them
might burn it through
and riddle my own like shot.

Should my house
be thundered frequently
by tread of hoof, the blacksmith
shoeing sparrows
bring new flame to forges,

I might believe you
far more willingly than that
the smoke of such a fire
had numbed the cortex
of your brain

which might explode
should you ignore
its tenancy as usual,

whether or not your conscience
loves the lies it takes
for makeshift sleeping pills

If, on the other hand,
a school of trout
should sniff about the chimney pots
for scent of cats,
lie headless on the skillet
as a plumage fold of fluff
sleeked into overlap of scales
then I should doubt your sanity
and mine alike,

sign both away
with salmon quill
to Mental Health.

TERROR ON CORNELIA STREET

Somehow,
it will not do
for me to dwell on butterflies
with dark eyes throbbing
in their orange wings
that taper off
in streams of fire
without recourse to something
solid to support
my head.

Therefore,
I must beg of you your mercy
for your pitch of ball
on brick might meet
my head again
if I should let it pass between
your sidewalk and the wall.

The butterflies were beautiful
but nausea
and fear of crushed skull
tell me that they are not.

THE PITCH

The brush stroke which turned out
to be applied upon the work's completion
can be determined by the practiced
eye, guided, as is mine, by intuition.

I capture it and sweep it backward
with an unused brush which sips
the painting from the canvas,

soon to be restored to palette
after having been so carelessly
misplaced, then find the brush stroke
next before it, and remove *it*;
then the next, peeling down the process
in exact reverse, lifting all
the brush strokes off in retrograde
down to the dry weaving,
leaving it as if untouched,
as if no nightmares ever had
instructed on it, false
in respectability, by frame conferred.

I offer it for sale, dry
as it is in bareness;
uncommitted brew in solid nip
to the bristles sniffing out
both form and line in raw
and eager brushes and a palette full
as if untasted and untested
as a rooftop dares to someone
to do it all again,
and do it well or just as it was
to tempt me to undo once more.

IN THE NICK OF TIME

It was quite simple; the people,
who were no more
than a scattering of soot
at the end of a city block
of cathedral nave, would be no problem.

By the time you had overtaken
them, you would surely
have accumulated sufficient
altitude to rise and walk
the air above them.

Once
that reasoning got loose
and fell on the soil
in your skull,
it rooted,

for suddenly
you clutched at every
pew you passed,
at every chair back,
fearing that each step
forward might be
your first one upward.

The pillars towered
and faded into the grayness
of an interior sky,

and as a doubt-laden glance
slid their smoky
solemnity upwards,
you sensed a slight lift
from a tug at your eye.

Then clutching at every
available solid
object along your path,
you retreated
to the doorway,
and just in time.

IN THE MESH OF MAYA

Mouths open in the mesh of Maya,
snatching at whatever may be blown against it,
in patches active, in others satisfied to savor
the intake of a day. There where interstices
do nothing more than breathe, wind plasters trash
against the mesh, as always with any other meeting.

That keeps them quiet while the others chatter,
talking with their mouths full as an uncoordinated chorus
multiplying incoherence to a din that no one
can ever untangle. Meanwhile the wind drops.
The fragments still stick to the mesh as if in bite
of many mouths, still silent until mesh nuggets
are bitten off, leaving as many mouths with rubbish.

NO COMMON GOBLET

Sorry to have slapped at you,
without warning you first,
but had you reached
aloft and leaped for that flagon,
hung on bullroarer thunder
above you, and had you
secured it
by its stem,
it would have risen
from its present height
above your hair,
tearing you from the floor,
and swinging you from the ceiling.

It would have dropped you then; it would,
I can guarantee it.
And had you failed
when it bobbed
away from you just
as you almost had it,

or *it* had you,

on a clatter of ceramic wings,²⁹
it would have climbed
to lunge at your head
with all its weight
of earthenware behind it,
or would have swerved
to dash its payload
in your face.

²⁹ The subject of this poem is a Viking-inspired winged goblet which occupied a prominent place on display at The Poet's Press loft.

A PARTY ANY TIME

A glass
blooms in my hand:
when did this sediment-
besotted blossom
root itself there?

The sixth in series;
only five past ten
and up
to the knees
in prose!

a proud night
for the plotting
of conspiracies,

knolled in displays of backs
to thwart a stranger,

of switchable challenges
and ears
at prowl.

I wonder
how many strata
of expensive furs weigh
upon my instant
out.

YOU COULD DIE LAUGHING

Suddenly you disintegrate.
Your shoulders draw forwards and downwards
as if you were sheltering
a faltering match.

Your eyebrows escape for sanctuary
in your hairline while the planes
and ledges in your face
battle with one another
like legatees.

You cough and shudder
on the verge of shattering. Your face
claps a lid of marble
on its contours of jelly
and writhes in agony behind it.

Your mouth pinches
down the unfortunate episode,
clamping it into an interim
state of suspension,

but under the shadow
of your eyes, a squat godling
with a swollen belly,
still clutches at the hot
and toxic seed
of revolution.

BANTAM EXECUTIVE

Clean-geared for business
and efficiency, scurrying upstream
flinging river-water wide from bow
in professional impatience,
stiff-lipped portrait of a clerk
turned manager, the runt ship³⁰
levels all nozzles for a signal
which will cannon streams of water
spear-forth strong enough to split
a pile lengthwise or dagger
through a warehouse door,

threatens a dash through shipping
to a stripling fire, all set, all polished,
dressed up for attack anticipating
war-play and relishing its role.

The valor of this executive rescuer
heats up chewed water orange-angered,
boils in froth of mouth with wrath-suds
of fanaticism, seeks catastrophe.

³⁰ The poem is a description of a fire-fighting boat engaged in an exercise in New York harbor.

VECTORS OF ADVICE

Pitch rises. Vectors climb
in catch and toss of landings all the way
up side of subject in black lacings strung
in back and forth upwardness,
and indicate, in shadow parody,
their implications traced
in wraith-tail up the surface
of the argument.

Two arms separate
in ninety degrees of difference,
each pointing a favorite direction
while, close at hand,
another orders buses
to leave the street for sky
and shrieks its stunted arrow up.

I sit on curb by sewer mouth
wait for a bus, space-borne to Vega.
Signs tell me not to stand.

LAST RITES

Our Great Aunt Sophia,
whose very name evoked images
of Cosmati mosaics³¹ and Byzantine domes,
was hardly the sort of woman
to put ants up her nose
or to snort them
with hits of cocaine.

Not at the age of ninety-eight
or any other would she
indulge such eccentric fancies,

but when kneeling beside
her casket for what my parents
determined should be my final kiss,

I actually saw the little beggars,
all three of them, marching
in single file out of her nostril
and down the parody of her face
into her preposterous collar.

It was the mortician
of this funeral home
who was to blame, of course.
He had never removed
those two elegantly sculptured
vultures from his mantelpiece,

³¹ *Cosmati mosaics*. The Cosmati were a dynasty of Roman architects and artists who created mosaics between 1190 and 1325 CE. Works done in emulation of their style are called, generically, Cosmati mosaics.

where they hunched
their shoulders at either end,
the eyes in their bowed heads
watchful of every shadowed
corner of a room which was all
a flutter of candles;
I can vouch for it.

DRACULA

Dracula beats
the dawn to my door
after a night of heavy
celebration with bits of twigs
clinging to the black
of his full-dress suit
and a smudge across
his snowy vest.

He feels the floor
with careful feet, controlled
as in ballet. He licks
at his socks diligently.
Damn that dust!

Renders rapt attention
to trivial matters.
Awakening his ears, he aims them
in my direction, yawns
and bares his minuscule fangs,
blood and all with his white-
tipped tail aloft, traipses
to a Pharoah's mausoleum.



TOWARD MAGRITTE

KRISHNA IN THE AFTERNOON

One of my many selves
sits on the grass
with the children,
driven by wonder
at the marvels that come
through our eyes, to sing
in the chapels of our heads.
Where the two brows
come together, perched above bridge
of the nose as a bird,
Krishna alights,
and the sun on the cymbals
bursts within him on the darkness
we have yet to break.

Suddenly, wind rises;
the finger cymbals are stilled.
I am another self
with a workday tomorrow
and today, as the death
of my incense, grown down
to the burning of my hand.

EXEUNT

The wind is blowing the stars away.
Tonight they flow down
gullies widening between the clouds.

Will nothing block
their passage, keep, at least
one statement in its place,
one tack rammed into Time
from which, in due course, some
will tear out and, slotted
stream away, leaving our mortality
one fragile scrap?

Clear out the clouds!
Herd islands coagulate in fog
towards any of the four directions

but with no snag of stars
in straggle of stray hair, loosened
by accelerated pace.

Crowd back the ragged edges
from that bank of why,
spare us our stay of stars
in millions!

SHAMBALLAH

Only those whose eyes
are unaccustomed to unlikely scales
of measurement or commonly
indiscernible planes of existence
will never see here
domes, pinnacles,
and tent-like structures with the gold
on their ornaments
gleaming.

For those
of a lesser keenness,
this is but a pocket lodged
among massive peaks and crags,
which only offer fallen stones
and sand; perhaps the weathered
remnants of a Chorten,³²
yet this is the Capital.

Here we are taxed and numbered
in accordance with our several purposes;
all of us everywhere: sheep,
whose heads lift frequently,
lest any breeze be freighted
with the shudder of a dying gong,
or the long growl in the monotone
of *mantram*,³³ resonant within the earth.

Here
padded tap on bronze
incites to riot, awakens anxiety,
hardens and tightens
to the knot of murder.

³² *Chorten*, a stupa, a Buddhist religious monument.

³³ *Mantram*, or *mantra*, a word or short phrase repeated over and over as a ritual.

Here also:
the chorus,
as if from caverns underground,
climbs into zest of purple
at the apex
of a summer noon.

Here
the genesis
of any impulse ignites
on a syllable.

THE FEATHER-PAINTING LUNATIC



KIDDING the wind side downward,
a seagull signaling in yellow
winks heresy in green, affronts
the sky in gash of color
unexpected in a gull
then falls straight down
beyond the roofs to wing-games
of as-yet-untinted birds
whose white ignites decision
in the wayward rush.

What happened here?
Someone ladder-paced himself
some stories well above
the altitude where paint revives
the victims of the wind and sun,
on rungs that scuttle
into clouds above the highest buildings,
swinging the gallon can of dregs
that just supplied the last
dip of that decadence
which splashed the mauve and violet
on this gull's fellows, while lifting
his own glad green
to grace and boldness.

No one has seen it done.
The ladder rears in evidence.
The empty gallon dangles in bold
flaunt of subversion, hung
before the eyes of all.

Ask among the streets
to find him in the city's coils,
if there is anyone around
who, to delight his evenings,
will stand on two springboard
bucking stilts with paintbrush
in his hand to decorate a gull.

A grin, spread ring
of gold across a face
will answer before you hear
the poetry that no one wants.

THE WHEEL RESUMES

The Ferris wheel moves up
after a stretch of waiting, lifts a car
into the clouds and out of sight.
You must not center on
a single rocking item, for Time will come
to swallow it. A quarter of an arc erases it
in slow rotation of the spears whose barbs describe
the wheel and write your memories about its rim.

We know the ink that tips the stylus,
smart of the second stuck where no resistance breaks
the scar inscription, ink that sours upon
circumference, sawing stability
with grit of stars. A carnival like this creates
nothing unforeseen, engenders no surprise.
The upward hitch is imminent. One day another car
will hang upon the star-spit of a former one.

STRANGE FOREST

Where were you
when you shrieked the shrill
of birches from the black of spruce
as if your skin met scars
and screamed somewhere in an alien wood
where you had sprung a trap
among the dried trees that rise
from wounds, seared by a holocaust,
a decade gone?

Where were you
when the lithe trees tensed to surface
of the paper and your fingers
plunged in forest depths to be
as easily withdrawn as are
the infant fingers that the knothole
jams when panic knobs the knuckles
and the hole snaps shut?

Your scream unlocked your trance.
We bared your eyes and still your fingers
worried at a distant grove rooted
in the shadowed gaps among the trees.
You tore them loose,
examined them as if for blood.

Were you in wilderness
of fern and moss beyond the advertising
tableau for a car, afraid
of every path that failed you
in the distant dark?

You left your fingers
captive there when you returned
and wrestled with the woods
to get them out.

THE FULL-STOP DOOR

I must get out, yet find the doorway sealed
with brick and mortar. I have long appealed
against the striate rasp, the grosgrain grind
rib-run down clapboards till my louvered blind
crisps corduroy-crazed, will not be healed.

Ridge-ridden down-space where an ample yield
of stripes, gaps, serried slays fall into field
of washboard abstract that seems to blind
unmoving maps with motion,

my sight cross-crannies exit so concealed
that frenzy falters, and the mind, once steeled,
then grooved, smoothes flat,
builds thought-reels so designed
that nothing moves them parallel and lined
in downfall like my own, which has congealed
unmoving eyes with motion.

WATER BABY

I seem to have you limp
in my hands.

Like water,
you are hard to hold.

An arm leaks stealthily
down through my fingers.

A leg, flung over a thumb,
kicks convulsively, almost
pulling the rest of you
after it, out and over,

and then my forefinger
goes through your eye.
Your nose sinks inwards.

I wish you would stiffen
up for once, bone yourself
back to some semblance
of a human body,

and lend me an arm that bends
only at the elbow.

I go on wishing.

CELEBRATION OF THE SELF

Eyebrows bearing down
upon a questioning stare;
grim mouth;
face whitened
by a cataract of night
about the ears, thick
with its catch
of stars.

Jaw set;
hands heaped beneath it
on the hilt
of broadsword;
shoulders
cascading a garment
in continuing
downward tumble.

All these
repeat themselves,
pinched into one as a hinge
between gigantic
wings,
as overflow
of energy,
caught by an instant
in an image.

TO MAKE THE DESERT BLOSSOM

What a challenging
expanse of floor! So wide
you long to cut it up
in squares and circles
of moving figures, playing
against each other in the context
of counter-rhythms, while in
and out and through them
the quicksilver of a soloist
leaps into blazing
sunbursts of exultation,

as the canvas
or the wall entices
the painter to break it
with various forms,
here
there and there,

as silence awaits
the dots and dabs of voices
to limit its eternity
with clumps of words
blooming in the shadeless desert,

as the ocean reflects
the infinite aspects
of the sunlight and shadow
at the taste of the wind
and chance
with water.

UFO

Silence unbroken.
In a smooth, high curve
a warmly orange pellet climbs
the sky and stops

above the poultry yard.
Then on the same track
backwards it returns and sinks
into a stand of pines.

A dog barks, awakened,
lapses back to sleep; the roof
of the farm truck
mirrors nothing.

Nothing remembered
of this beauty, the night
moves on. Quiet.
Not a leaf disturbed.

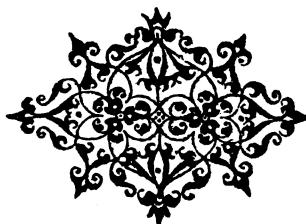
THE ARCHETYPAL EVENING

So many Summer evenings
when a farm goes black in silhouette
as corncrib and scarecrow stand
out sharply against the brittle blue
of a slowly darkening sky

And the farmhouse seeks
to be nothing at all but a bright light
somewhere among hidden upper windows,

when as a slender wire
the brand-new moon screams
of its whetting, which I cannot
hear, and the stars come out
shyly in pairs and singles,

I have seen this happening
some thousand times before
and enjoyed it,
in the silence of recognition.





A B O U T T H E P O E T

Barbara Adams Holland was born on July 12, 1925 in Portland, Maine. Her childhood was spent in Doylestown, PA and then in Philadelphia.

Her father was Leicester Bodine Holland (1882-1952), an architect who moved in mid-career to art history and archaeology. For a number of years he commuted weekly from Philadelphia to Washington, where he was Chief of the Division of Fine Arts at the Library of Congress. Later he taught at Bryn Mawr College, and also worked with the Corinth excavations of the American School in Athens.

The poet's mother was Louise Adams Holland (1883-1990), an archaeologist and academic specializing in the Latin language (her last work was a study of the Roman poet Lucretius). Her other passions were gardening, swimming, and exploring the mountains of the Adirondacks and Tuscany.

An aunt, Leonie Adams, was an esteemed poet, and a one-time Poet Laureate of the United States.

Barbara's sister, Marian (b. 1927), married an architect and lived in Philadelphia. Her brother, Lawrence Rozier Holland, became a physicist.

Her sister Marian McAllister writes about Barbara's childhood:

Barbara was sickly for the first year or two and had little contact with other children.

She taught herself to read, at first from labels on food packages and ads in trolley cars. By the time she was five she was teaching me, two years younger, to read as well.

Living within walking distance of the University (of Pennsylvania) Museum, where her father often took her, Barbara developed an interest in other languages, first in hieroglyphics, then in Chinese.

All three of us went to an old-fashioned "dame school" of some twenty-four children from the University of Pennsylvania community. The single room held "classes" ranging from kindergarten through sixth grade.

Barbara then attended private schools, graduating from the Baldwin School in 1943.

Barbara Holland received a B.A. from University of Pennsylvania in 1948, and an M.A. from the same institution in 1951.

Although she had completed all the course work for a Ph.D., she left graduate school without completing her thesis.

She worked in Worcester, MA on a new edition of the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, taught at a college in West Virginia, researched genealogies, and then worked in New York City for a Wall Street brokerage.

Finally, the lure of Bohemia — Greenwich Village — and the life of a poet, became irresistible. With the slender income from a small cache of stocks and bonds, she quit working around 1962 and rented the apartment at 14 Morton Street in Greenwich Village that would be home for the rest of her life.

Her first chapbook publication, self-published and undated, was *Medusa*, a 20-page stapled booklet. Another collection, *Return in Sagittarius*, was published in 1965. Another chapbook was *A Game of Scraps* (1967). A projected volume of her poems with the photographs of Donald Curran apparently did not materialize, but the poems alone appeared in a slender chapbook as *Lens, Light, and Sound* (1968), reproduced in the present volume. Other small chapbooks were *Melusine Remembered* (1974), *On This High Hill* (1974), and *You Could Die Laughing* (1975).

Holland received a Creative Arts Public Service Fellowship in 1974, and during the following year was engaged in workshops and visits with many schools. She was a fellow at the Macdowell Colony in 1976. She read frequently throughout the Northeast at poetry readings, guest-edited two issues of Boston's *Stone Soup Poetry* journal, and read her work on radio for WBAI, WRVR, WUWM, and WNYC. She recorded for Folkways Records and on broadcasts for Voice of America.

The poet was also involved with The New York Poets Cooperative, a writers' group founded in 1969. A founding member, she organized and scheduled poetry readings they hosted at St. John's Church in the Village.

Her greatest success was in the then-burgeoning little magazines, and Holland could boast that her poems had appeared in over 1,000 magazines and publications. She was certainly one of the most-published American poets of the 1970s and 1980s.

Her association with The Poet's Press began in 1973 with the publication of *Autumn Wizard*, a sampler from her long cycle of poems inspired by the surrealist painter René Magritte. This cycle, *Crises of Rejuvenation*, was published by The Poet's Press, in 1973 and 1974 in

two volumes, and remains in print in a single-volume 30th anniversary edition. Other collections of Holland's work from this publisher include *Burrs* (1977), *Autumn Numbers* (1980), *Collected Poems, Volume 1* (1980), *In the Shadows* (1984), *Medusa: The Lost Chapbook* (2019), *The Secret Agent* (2019), *The Beckoning Eye* (2019), *Out of Avernus* (2019), *The Shipping on the Styx* (2019), and *After Hours in Bohemia* (2020).

Another small press, Warthog Books, issued its own "selected poems" collection of Holland's work, *Running Backwards* (1983).

Holland's readings of her poems were from memory, even including her longer dramatic pieces. Audiences were riveted by her performances, whether of the spine-chilling "Black Sabbath," the self-effacing humor of "The Inevitable Knife," or the desolate sorrow of "Not Now, Wanderer." Michael Redmond wrote of her in 1981 in *The Newark Star-Ledger*, "[S]he is a poet who evades categorization. Her work has been variously described as romantic, mythic, supernatural and surreal; she is as adept at evoking a seascape as in creating a monologue by Medusa. There are city poems, and love poems, and poems both funny and terrifying. The common denominator is her extraordinary imagination, the classical precision of her language, and a wild sense of humor."

During her last five years, the poet was beset with health problems. She had difficulty reading her work, and her performances were marred by long pauses and memory lapses. After a series of small strokes, her health deteriorated and she spent some time recovering at her sister's home in Philadelphia. Returning to New York, she died there on September 21, 1988.

Several contemporaneous reviews and essays had acknowledged Holland's extraordinary gifts, most notably a long review by Stephen-Paul Martin in *Central Park* (1981), and a symposium issue on the poet in *Contact II* (1979), but Holland never achieved the fame she richly deserved.

Commentary about Holland, including interviews, can be found at www.poetspress.org/fp_holland.shtml

For those who heard her, or who have collected her books, Holland remains a vital voice. She is still whispered about as "the Sybil of Greenwich Village."



The Poet's Press

PITTSBURGH, PA

A B O U T T H I S B O O K

The body text for this book is Cheltenham, a typeface designed in 1896 by architect Bertram Goodhue and printer Ingalis Kimball. The fully-developed typeface was designed by Morris Fuller Benton at American Typefounders and released in hot metal in 1902. Until the 1930s it was a dominant type for headlines, and its legibility and character made it a popular face in Arts and Crafts publications, including those of The Roycrofters. It is still employed for headlines by *The New York Times*. The digital version employed in this book is ITC Cheltenham, designed in 1975 by Tony Stan for International Typeface Corporation.

Poem titles are set in Schneidler Black, designed by F. H. Ernst Schneidler for the German Bauer type foundry in the 1930s.

The title-page border and the block initials are from the press of Alessandro Paganini, son of the Renaissance Venetian printer Paganino Paganini (c. 1450-1538). This border was probably designed and printed in his shop in a monastery on Isola del Garda. Block initials are also by Paganini, using the same kind of arabesque design. Since the letter "W" does not exist in Latin or Italian, The Poet's Press designed its own letter "W" to complete the available alphabet.

Other historical ornamental borders in this book are from Renaissance French printers.

The cumulative effect of this mixture of type, initials and borders is to simulate the production of a letterpress shop, whose compositor might employ, according to his own sense of balance and proportion, whatever materials were at hand, in this case spanning more than 400 years of printing history.

